

The Varieties of Women's Wage Work in Colonial Korea

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This discussion reveals that industrialization did not initiate Korean women's work but merely differentiated between paid and unpaid forms of female labor. During the colonial era, a woman's role in household production depended on her marital status. While the family remained a productive unit, the structural changes and transformations of labor brought on by modernization necessitated the familial adoption of the wage system. I review how colonial modernization influenced the work and living conditions of married and unmarried women. Apart from performing unpaid domestic duties, married women took on jobs flexible enough for simultaneous childcare, such as household industrial labor, agricultural wage work, urban service work, and labor in small- to medium-scale food processing and rubber factories. Despite a few exceptions, the majority of poor, single, young women entered factories, continuing their supportive roles in family economies. Thus, I examine the expansion of female labor intensive industries, particularly those recruiting single women, in the 1920s and 1930s. Finally, I interpret why these women entered the factories, their rationales, and motivations, all of which strongly suggests that women's contributions to political economies were moved by familial ties.

Keywords: colonial industrialization, family economy, wage labor, working women

Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, suffragists across cultures depicted the rise of women's industrial work in progressive terms, but as Ada Heather Biggs observed in 1894, the share taken by women in the "work of the world" had not altered in amount or in intensity, "only in character" (Scott and Tilly 1978, vi).

In Korea under Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945), industrialization offered new forms of work but did not drastically transform the extent of women's duties. While capitalist development was associated with the decline of household industry, progress was uneven and homes, workshops, and factories existed in harmony for the majority of the early twentieth century. As they did in the earlier Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), women engaged in domestic chores and married women often served as handicraft production managers. By the 1920s, however, women commenced agricultural wage work at commercialized farms and industrial labor in textile and rubber mills and various workshops. Although unmarried young women remained in domestic service and in factory work, with increasing participation in public education, women entered skilled positions as typists, clerks, and teachers. Examining in conjunction colonial modernization and the rise of women's wage work, they indicate that modern industries, while important, offered only limited forms of employment among a variety of women's occupations in early twentieth-century Korea.¹

According to Frederick Engels and Marxist feminists, people's occupations and indeed the family, the state, and the rise of private property relied on the agricultural mode of production (Engels 1972). Thus, most traditional societies which were organized around agrarian households, including Korea at the turn of the twentieth century, produced goods domestically in a system that Joan Scott and Louise Tilly call the family economy. Since specialization made production more efficient, a married couple gained value from sharp divisions of labor "because the husband would specialize in some types of human capital and the wife in others" (Scott and Tilly 1978, 2; Becker 1996, 21). The successful reproduction and rearing of children offered parents additional labor for farming and home enterprises. While the size and composition of the household was dependent on the social structure and demography, "the requirements of the household put practical constraints on the permissible variation in household age and sex composition" (Sorensen 1988, 38-40). Therefore, parents raised the number of children they needed and rarely more. Parents also synchronized parturition to maximize their security, keeping their elderly needs in mind. In early

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twentieth-century Korea, where primogeniture was common, first-born sons and not daughters continued the patriline. Although peasant families might not have had much to leave to descendants of either sex, girls, who were legally bound to the families of their future husbands, rarely received inheritance and were seen as deficits and not assets to the family economy. The productive needs of the household not only determined the family structure and composition but also the frequency and timing of familial events. Births, periods of education or training, employment, marriage, moving, and retirement were all influenced by the changing needs of the household (Sorensen 1988, 38-40; Hareven 1978).

This discussion extends Biggs' observation to the colonial Korean context: while women's contributions to political economies seemed unprecedented, women's work in family economies had persisted since prehistory. Colonial modernization did not initiate women's work but merely differentiated between paid and unpaid forms of labor, arguably diminishing the value of domestic labor altogether. To portray how modern economic development influenced women in early twentieth-century Korea, I first examine the family economy, meaning the domestic mode of production organized around households. A woman's role in household production depended on her marital status and life stage; women's work also differed for mothers and daughters. While the family remained a productive unit, the structural changes and transformations of labor brought on by industrialization and commercialization necessitated the familial adoption of the wage system. Then I review how these economic changes influenced the work and living conditions of married and unmarried women. Prominent features of modern development, including the expansion of the monetary economy and wage labor, blurred the distinctions between the duties of older and younger women; forms of work, however, did not deter women's involvement in family economies. Apart from performing unpaid domestic duties, married women took on jobs flexible enough for simultaneous childcare, such as household industrial labor, agricultural wage work, urban service work, and labor in small- to medium-scale food processing and rubber factories which hired part-time and seasonal workers. Unmarried women, though continuing their supportive roles in family economies, underwent new forms of recruitment and training. Young women remained in domestic service but were also mobilized through state-controlled employment offices. The expansion of public education also opened future opportunities for youths in white collar jobs as typists, telephone operators, clerks, salespersons, teachers, and nurses. Nevertheless, the majority of poor, single women entered factories, as light industrialists favored

the employment of young women in their teens and early twenties. This development coincides with the fourth issue of inquiry: the expansion of female labor intensive industries in the 1920s and 1930s. In my conclusion, I interpret why these women entered the factories, their rationales and motivations, all of which strongly suggests that women's contributions to political economies were moved by familial, personal ties.

The Family Economy in Colonial Korea

At the outset of Japanese annexation in 1910, the most pervasive form of capital in Korea was land along with its cultivated product. Rural society was constituted by landlords, owner-cultivators, semi-tenants, landless tenants, and wage workers. Although tenancy and landlessness increased throughout the nineteenth century, based upon the Cadastral Land Survey of 1910-1918 which recorded, titled and taxed each acre of land, over 77 percent of households in Korea lived on their land as tenants or semi-tenants. Landless tenancy increased throughout the colonial era; in 1922, tenants comprised 41 percent of the rural workforce, and this figure climbed to more than 60 percent by the last years of colonial rule. In the countryside, tenant farming was pervasive but also not enough for many families to meet their material demands. While in 1913, 13 percent of tenants also worked for wages, "by 1926, the figure was 16 percent," and by 1940, it was over 35 percent (Jeong 1988, 55; Shin 1996, 49-51). Members of tenant families not only cultivated borrowed land but also worked as migrant agricultural wage workers or in small-scale industries operating in rural areas as both forms of employment increased during the colonial era.

Whereas, in premodern economies, men's and women's work was defined by the labor requirements of the household, with the expansion of the monetary system, the functions of individual family members came to be determined by the family's need for income to meet living expenses. In addition, with increasing industrial and urban development, the location of work changed. But the modern 'family wage economy' served as an extension of the family economy "as the old rules continued to operate in new contexts" (Scott and Tilly 1978, 104). Wages neither initially nor totally replaced the household mode of production, as family strategies were not directly proportional to land cultivation. A household with a small amount of land, for example, may have needed "large amounts of labor because the return to labor [was] lower on tenancies than on

land owned by one's own household" (Sorensen 1988, 41). Married and unmarried men continued agricultural labor as tenants or hired workers. According to Gi-wook Shin, over 22,600 tenants hired over 81,800 wage laborers in 1930 (Shin 1996, 50). As commercialized rice production prompted agricultural restructuring, greater numbers of men and women worked the fields as wage workers throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Those women without waged labor in the countryside continued their work in handicrafts, spinning, weaving, and knitting, as well as pickling vegetables and making straw bags to supplement household earnings. In assessing whether "work improved women's positions," Scott and Tilly conclude that although the conditions of labor changed with industrialization, women's economic roles were not altered as dramatically as previously thought (Scott and Tilly 1978, 2; Yi 1922).

While people's economic, or functional, roles did not change, how they fulfilled these roles shifted throughout early twentieth-century Korea. Whether urban or rural, the expansion of wage work differentiated individual and family schedules, rationalizing and dichotomizing labor and leisure time. Urban migration coincided with the commercialization of agriculture and capitalist development; the peninsula's share of city-dwellers jumped from three to thirteen percent in the thirty-five years of colonial rule. Over 60,000 Koreans left their farms between 1930 and 1935; in the latter half of the 1930s, over 220,000 migrated from the countryside. Most migrants found jobs on the peninsula, but throughout the 1930s and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) Koreans increasingly went abroad to Japan, Manchuria, and Siberia. Technology and circumstance determined not only individual but household behavior whose goal was "always adoption, or the solution of problems caused by the environment" (Sorensen 1988, 35).

Although some families moved as a unit, usually individual family members left for seasonal or contractual wage work. The movement of members within a household was defined by "kin-work," or the labor that families needed for its continuation; "kin-time," or the temporal and sequential ordering of family transitions; and "kin-scription" - "the process of assigning kin-work to family members" (Stack and Burton 1994, 33). As the backbones of still largely agricultural communities, mothers and fathers, as well as grandparents stayed behind in the countryside, engaging in farm work and household industrial labor. The few children who remained at home or who were sent away for schooling were most likely primary sons. The practice of hiring out second- and third-born sons as fieldhands and daughters as domestic servants was steeped in tradition. While

industrial labor was an unprecedented experience, children's contribution to the family economy was not. Nevertheless, there were some variations in how parents scripted, or appropriated, offspring for production. Examining urban migration during the first decade of rapid industrialization (1925 to 1935) shows that more women, in particular younger women, moved to cities as compared to men. From 1925 to 1930, 21 percent of girls and 19 percent of boys, aged five to nine, moved to cities; 35 percent of females and 29 percent of males, aged ten to fourteen, migrated to urban centers. Between 1930 and 1935, 18 percent of girls and 15 percent of boys, aged five to nine, moved to cities; 31 percent of females and 24 percent of males, aged ten to fourteen, moved to cities. While more men migrated after the age of twenty, more women, on the whole, made the rural-urban transition. Between 1925 and 1930, over 22 percent of women and 19 percent of men moved from the countryside to the city (Chang 1967, 131). Census records show that between 1925 and 1935, females and minors under fifteen years of age entered urban factory employment at faster rates than did male adults.²

The demographic change seen throughout the colonial era was both general and local. In 1930 the rate of childbirth among 1,000 women was 41.7 to 42.7, by 1935 this figure decreased from 39 to 42.7, and in 1940 from 35.7 to 38.8. The age of marriage among women also rose slightly, from 17 years of age in 1930 to 17.5 in 1940. Like migration, however, demographic tendencies not only varied according to historical circumstances but also an individual's age and his or her place of residence. In 1930, 31 percent of rural women between the ages of fifteen to nineteen were without mates, whereas 64 percent of urban women in the same age range were single. While less than 1 percent of rural women aged twenty to twenty-four were single, almost 16 percent of urban women in the same age range were unmarried. Modernization, that is the concomitant processes of globalization, capitalization, industrialization, urbanization and rationalization, transformed the settings of life and work and altered the characteristics of human alliances, making them more fluid and multifaceted than premodern times. Although some women were more affected by these changes than others, for the majority of the colonial era, females constitutes over

2. In 1925, approximately 33.6 percent of child workers under fifteen lived in cities, but by 1930 this figure had risen to 34.3 percent and to 36.2 percent in 1935. See Chōsen saōtokufu (Government-General of Korea), *Chōsen kokusei chōsa hōkoku* (Report of the Census in Korea), 1925, 1930, 1935.

30 percent of the industrial workforce and over 40 percent of the total workforce indicates that modern economic development owed much to the labors of women (Chang 1967, 238, 257; Jeong 1988, 62-5).

Married Women's Wage Work

A married woman's (*gihon yeoseong*) work in premodern society depended on her husband's economic position, his land holdings, and his status. Aristocratic women were indoctrinated with behavioral codes but the extent to which women of the lower classes aspired toward elite values is difficult to measure. In most rural households, a vast array of tasks ensured the survival of the household members: harvests had to be "processed and stored, domestic animals cared for, meals made and served, clothing provided and maintained." As Clark Sorensen explains, "a clear division of labor for males and females" prevailed for the accomplishment of these tasks. Men's work consisted of outdoor labor: farming major crops, operating the irrigation system, construction, and maintaining farm tools as well as organizing markets and labor exchange. Married women generally performed the 'inside work' of the household: "producing and managing food stores, growing vegetables, preparing meals, making clothing and bearing and raising children" (Sorensen 1988, 133-4; Gweon 1989, 225-43). Foodstuffs, crafts and apparel manufactured at home by women were sold and exchanged in markets, reflecting women's multiple functions. Weaving was done in almost every household, and portions of traditional state taxes were levied on cloth. Thus, through spinning and weaving as well as the preparation and exchange of vegetable goods and animal husbandry, women upheld the household economy in premodern society.

Although throughout the colonial era rural women continued their household duties, ever more married women ventured into agricultural wage work. In premodern society, tilling the fields (*nonggyeong*) or outdoor labor (*ogwoe nodong*) was reserved for men. Nonetheless, colonial capital and policies geared toward the mobilization and stratification of rural labor, including the Rural Revitalization Campaign (*Nongchon jinheung undong*) of 1932, also redefined the gender boundaries of farm work. By the 1930s, through membership in agricultural cooperatives (*gongdong gyeongjak*), women commenced waged, outdoor labor in large numbers. According to the 1930 census, women not only comprised around a third of the industrial workforce but also formed 32.2 per-

cent of the aggregate number of tillage farmers, and generally a third of the rural labor force (*Chōsen kokusei chōsa hōkoku* 1930; Shin 1996, 135).

Women's employment on farms took a variety of forms, but as in industry, married or older women were represented in certain types of work more than others. Whereas females were only 2.9 percent of the labor force in forestry (*imeop*), they were predominant in animal husbandry (*juksan* or *mokchuk*), forming 76.4 percent of the workforce. Women reared chicken, pigs, sheep, rabbits, and other domestic animals (*kachuk*) for meat, eggs, leather, and wool (*Donga ilbo*, April 6, 1925; April 16, 1933). Females constituted 95.2 percent of the total workforce in silkworm cultivation (*yangjam nongga*). As for vegetable cultivation (*singmul jaebae*), women workers planted spinach, turnips, bean sprouts, bellflowers and bracken, to name a few. Although most raw cotton (*yugjimyeon*) processed in colonial textile mills was imported, the cotton cultivated (*myeonjak*) in Korea was handled by women. Also in the 1930s, the cultivation of medicinal plants (*yagyong singmul*) began as a female-labor intensive project (*Donga ilbo*, January 20, 1933; July 21, 1933; January 23, 1936).

Were rural women 'better off' than city women? The conflicting data makes this question difficult to answer. As with factory work, agricultural workers were subject to a wage system that systematically reduced salaries in accordance with nationality and gender. Throughout the colonial era, Japanese workers' wages were double that of Korean workers, and men earned twice as much as women. In general, agricultural earnings were lower than industrial ones. For example, in 1923, the average daily wage for mining was 0.88 yen, construction was 0.94 yen, and agricultural work was 0.45 yen. In addition, earnings did not increase with experience. Between 1920 and 1930, agricultural wages actually decreased from 0.81 yen in 1925 to 0.73 yen in 1930 for men and from 0.44 yen to 0.42 yen for women. Daily wages not only depended on the kind of agricultural work performed but also the location of work. In suburban areas, farm workers could earn as much as industrial employees. In the remote countryside, however, men earned on average 0.35 yen, women 0.20 yen, and children 0.15 yen. Despite financial drawbacks, agricultural work offered fewer restrictions and more freedom of movement than factory work, which makes qualitative comparisons difficult (Jeong 1988, 85; Choe et. al. 1993, 52; Chōsen sōtokufu gakumukyoku shakaika 1933, 84, 233-43).

Colonial modernization turned rural craftswomen into agricultural and industrial workers. Agricultural women's societies, such as the Women's Labor Corps (*Buin geullodan*), the Women's Cooperative for Cotton Cultivation (*Buin gong-*

dong myeonjakdan) and the Women's Youth Corps (*Yeoja cheongnyeondan*), formed in the late 1920s and the 1930s to mobilize rural women workers. In addition, training centers (*gangseupso*) for specialized work, such as sericulture and cotton cultivation, emerged and expanded (*Donga ilbo*, May 6, 1933; July 19, 1933; *Maeil sinbo*, June 26, 1934; December 3, 1938). The majority of students in the sericulture schools and centers for cotton cultivation were women (*Donga ilbo*, January 20, 1933; July 21, 1933; August 10, 1933; March 19, 1935). During the early 1930s, nurseries for working mothers were established. By 1935, there were 96 rural nurseries (*Nongchon tagaso*) in Gyeonggi Province, 100 in South Gyeongsang Province and 149 nurseries in South Jeolla Province. But the formation of nurseries did not necessarily translate into their adequacy. Rural women were often found tilling the fields with "children on their backs and stomachs" (Jeok 1927, 21).

Whereas in premodern societies, the goods needed in daily life were produced in households, with industrialization, commodities were manufactured in large enterprises. This transition was not immediate, and while large-scale industrial projects expanded during the colonial era, household industries remained important. In 1933, 40.1 percent of industrial production was attributable to household industries. This figure decreased to 33.1 percent by 1935 and to 24.7 percent by 1938. Despite its decline, household industries comprised a formidable proportion of the peninsula's production throughout the colonial era. Officials recorded both men and women as the entrepreneurs of household industries, but the labor of married women in such domestic projects was usually greater (Jeong 1988, 75).

According to the Government-General, scale defined a household industry as having five or less workers. A variety of articles, representative of nearly every manufacturing industry, were also produced domestically. In food processing, women made alcoholic beverages as well as soy sauce, bean paste, flour, vegetable preserves, fish preserves, and confectioneries. In lumber, "furniture, casks, tubs" and lathe work were produced in handicraft workshops. Items assembled in the miscellaneous category were "bamboo wear, paper ware, rattan ware, rush ware, needle work, footwear," and straw ware, such as ropes and bags. In textiles, household production focused mainly on the processing of wild silkworm cocoons, as well as spinning, weaving and knitting of cotton and hemp. In ceramics, women manufactured earthen utensils, bricks and tiles. In machinery, handicraft workers made agricultural tools and implements, and the chemical products produced by the household industry was strongly represented in medi-

cines, vegetable oil and animal fat products, fish oil, paper, fish fertilizers, and coal bricks (Grajdanzev 1944, 151-2).

Domestic enterprises were regionally distinctive. Like agricultural wage workers, women in household industries were represented more in the southern provinces than in the northern provinces. In 1933, approximately 6.5 million households (*ho*) were registered as producing handicrafts, and by 1937 nearly 2,700 households, with over 10,000 members, participated in household industries in Seoul. Primary sources suggest that while rural households manufactured handicrafts as “secondary enterprises” (*bueop*) or projects secondary to agricultural production, home enterprises in cities produced goods as “main enterprises” (*jeoneop*), with handicrafts as the primary source of income. By the mid-1930s, the number of household industries increased in the cities and vocational schools for the teaching of sericulture and knitting methods were established to promote handicraft production (Yun 1929, 93-4; *Donga ilbo*, May 1, 1935; Jeong 1988, 76).

Rapid industrialization in the 1920s offered married women opportunities for industrial labor, but in cities, still other forms of work prevailed. When women were unable to work in factories or were dismissed, they could remain in urban areas and work independently as street vendors or street peddlers. Rather than starting independent enterprises, more women probably looked to the hotel and restaurant or service industries for employment. They could also find work as laundresses or cleaners in lodgings and motels. Restaurants hired women to prepare and cook food. For both the married and the unmarried, sexualized service work as waitresses or as servers in wine houses increased throughout the early twentieth century. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, women entered the rapidly developing service industry in cities such as Seoul, Pyongyang, Busan, Daegu, Masan, Incheon, and Weonsan (*Donga ilbo*, June 24, 1927; May 30, 1936; Akamatsu 1962, 3-25). In industrialized sectors, women comprised approximately 30 percent of the labor force between 1920 and 1945; in all sectors, women formed around 40 percent of the total labor force in Korea throughout most of the colonial era (Jeong 1988, 62).

Unmarried Women's Work

Whereas a man's residence was secure from birth, a woman's habitation changed after marriage. A woman was not considered a permanent member of

her parents' household, and at best, obtained only a secondary position in her husband's household after she bore a son. In less privileged households, it was not uncommon for girls as young as eight or nine to leave their homes to take service in another family's household. The most common form of work for young unmarried women (*mihon yeoseong*) in the traditional family economy was household service. A female domestic servant (*gasa sayongin*) was a household dependent who worked in return for food, board, and wages. Peasant boys employed as male servants tended to work outdoors in the fields as seasonal laborers while girls were confined to indoor work year-round. Service was the customary means by which households exchanged labor supply, thus balancing their own needs of labor and consumption (Bak 1986, 264).³

According to the 1930 census, approximately 120,000 persons worked as domestic servants: 76 percent being women and 97.7 percent of these women were live-in servants.⁴ Around 57.3 percent were children under fifteen years of age, but a review of sources shows that servants were not always single. During times of economic hardship and surplus labor, women under the age of thirty frequently parted from their husbands to take service in another's household. Though, in traditional society, women worked in the residences of local landlords and aristocrats; by the 1930s, domestic employment became regulated. In Seoul, for example, employment offices served as intermediaries between those requiring and those seeking domestic service (*Chōsen kokusei chōsa hōkoku* 1930: Donga ilbo, March 13, 1928; November 28, 1937).

Systems of payment, however, were far from uniform and whether women were given monthly or yearly wages varied according to employers. Wages for domestic service were "anywhere from 2.5 yen to 9 yen per month," but cases existed when after prepayment (*seongeum*), young women worked without pay (*mugeup*). In many cases servants were verbally as well as physically abused and were vulnerable to dismissal without pay at any given time. Still, women ran away far more frequently than they were formally dismissed. If servants earned what they needed for dowries, they could marry. But if they escaped without pay, they most likely looked to serve in other households or sought alter-

3. In 1930, seasonal workers accounted for 48.3 percent of the total agricultural population. Most likely these were young boys who served as 'arm hands' during harvest seasons (Bak Gyeongsik. 1986: 264).

4. While 0.3 percent of domestic servants commuted (*donggeun*), the majority were 'ive-in' (*sangju*) employees. *Chōsen kokusei chōsa hōkoku* (Report of the Census in Korea) 1930: 224.

native forms of work. The then contemporary intellectual Kim Weonju feared that servants who faced excessive hardship and mistreatment frequently fell prey to “unsavory” forms of work in “red-light districts (*yullakka*)” (Kim 1931, 105; Donga ilbo, December 20, 1925; April 5, 1926; October 10, 1937).

Although scholars have attributed the rise of female child workers in textile and silk reeling industries to Japanese industrial designs, it is equally arguable that the modern roles of peasant girls were drawn from Korean traditions. Just as it was not uncommon for young rural women to take service in other households in premodern Korea, daughters of early twentieth-century families were expected to contribute to the family economy. Even if they did not supplement household earnings, numerous parents might have preferred for their daughters to live away from home, thereby easing their domestic burdens. Gim Yeongseon, a former clerical worker at the Gyeongseong Textile Company in Yeongdeungpo, stated that parents did not send their daughters to the factory with the expectation that wages would be sent home. Rather it was to reduce the size and consumption levels of the family.⁵ In Europe, daughters functioned as the ‘arms of the family economy’. In East Asia, daughters were the ‘wings’ of the household - family members who were expected to ‘fly away’ in due time.

Extending Confucian paternalism, managers in textile and silk industries devised recruitment methods and forms of residence that resembled aspects of domestic service. Because silk reeling, and to a lesser extent textile production, relied on access to domestic and imported raw materials, the spinning and weaving factories were located in industrial towns and cities that legitimized employers’ practices of recruiting and housing their workers. Moreover, the need to organize workers around machinery that operated 24-hours a day further warranted rationalized systems of labor and residence. Seeking the most obedient and economical workers, company recruiters searched the hinterlands for peasant girls from especially impoverished areas. Girls under fifteen years of age and female adolescents under twenty composed the majority of the workforce in textile factories and silk reeling mills.

A considerable number of textile and silk reeling factories in Korea were large-scale enterprises owned by Japanese conglomerates with over forty years of industrial experience. By the time they ventured into the Korean labor market,

5. I am particularly indebted to Professor Gang Yi-Su who generously shared her interviews with two former employees of colonial textile factories with me (Interview of Kim Yeongseon, on June 27, 1991).

Japanese textile companies had established efficient production methods and labor control that relied heavily on an unmarried female labor force. While heavy industries might have depended on a permanent labor force with dedicated lifelong employees, textile industries required no such loyalty. The high turnover rates (*idongnyul*) accommodated employers who preferred to disregard workers' long-term security and who enjoyed the cost-effectiveness of child labor. Factories adopted production methods and labor control that simulated domestic service: providing wages and residence as well as classes on sewing, knitting, and other domestic duties for a period of three to five years. Sources on Korean-owned textile and silk factories indicate that Korean employers adopted similar systems of production, recruitment and labor control.

The Expansion of Female Labor Intensive Industries

As a result of the WWI economic boom, young women in Korea gained entry into textile production, such as silk reeling, cotton spinning, weaving, and knitting, in the 1920s. Consumption industries like tobacco, wine, food and rice processing factories also favored female employees. While fewer married women worked in industrialized settings, they found jobs in the chemical industry, manufacturing rubber shoes, fish and vegetable oils. Statistics of industrial workers throughout the colonial era show the movement of women workers away from food processing and textiles, albeit in gradual numbers, into all other industrial sectors. While some scholars maintain that the decrease in textile production translated directly into the general reduction of women in the workforce, a critical review shows that women became more proportionally distributed throughout all industrial sectors rather than decreasing in influence.⁶

Manufacturing in the 1920s focused on the production of cheap, coarse, daily commodities for the domestic and export markets. Since small-scale industries did not entail large capital outlay or technical machinery, entrepreneurs preferred them in view of the plentiful Korean labor supply. Notwithstanding the heavy industries including mining, ironworks, lumber, electronics, and cement projects, some of the foremost modern factories founded in the late 1910s also produced textile goods. Large-scale food and beverage processing enterprises like

6. Percentage Distribution of Male and Female Workers across Industries, 1921-1943.

Asahi Brewing (Asahi jōzō), Dai Nihon Sugar Refining (Dai Nihon seitō), and Manju Flour Milling (Manshū seifun) also commenced during this time. Early industries concentrated on the production of consumer and apparel goods, with women dominating the manufacturing sectors, including leather (*pibok*) and rubber shoe (*gomusin*) production. Though the chemical industry employed both men and women, females constituted 60 to 70 percent of the total pool of laborers (*jikgong*) in the rubber industry (*gomu sangeop*) throughout the colonial era and after Liberation (Seong 1969: 59-61).

Although the textile industry established modern, large-scale facilities by the 1930s, it began with the tradition of silk reeling. Japanese investment in silk reeling (*jesa*) was most prominent from the late 1910s to the early 1930s. Cotton spinning (*myeonbangjeok*) gained greater priority in the early 1930s, but by the latter half of the decade the focus of textile production once again shifted to the manufacture of synthetic fibers (*injogyeon or ingyeon*). The formation of large-scale silk mills in Korea was influenced by the advances of the Mitsui Corporation. The Chōsen Spinning and Weaving Company, established in 1917, started a silk reeling division soon after its founding. In 1919, Joseon Silk Reeling (Chōsen seishi) founded a factory in Daegu, and Kunze Silk Reeling

	1921		1930		1935		1940		1943	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Textiles	3.9	28.1	7.7	51.6	6.3	49.0	6.5	46.0	9.8	59.4
Metals	29.7	0.4	5.4	0.2	5.9	0.2	8.9	0.9	14.5	2.0
Machinery	5.9	0.1	4.7	0.0	6.1	0.2	16.0	1.3	16.9	1.6
Ceramics	14.0	3.5	8.9	1.3	7.7	1.5	7.3	2.5	12.0	4.6
Chemicals	2.7	1.2	15.7	21.3	25.1	26.7	31.1	24.1	18.5	14.6
Lumber	3.7	0.0	4.8	0.0	5.2	0.1	6.9	0.9	9.8	1.8
Printing and Publications	5.6	0.3	7.3	0.3	5.8	0.4	3.8	0.5	3.4	0.8
Food Processing	23.8	53.7	40.3	22.2	33.4	18.3	14.4	13.5	8.9	8.4
Gas and Electricity	1.4	0.0	1.3	0.0	1.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.4	0.3
Miscellaneous	11.0	12.1	3.7	2.7	3.5	3.6	5.2	10.3	3.8	6.4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Chōsen sōtokufu. *Chōsen sōtokufu tōkei nenpō*. (Statistical Yearbook of the Government-General of Korea). Keijō: Chōsen sōtokufu: 1921, 1930, 1935, 1940, and 1943. While these statistics provide an overview of the composition and movement of industrial labor in the colonial era, the figures often deviate and are known to be greatly underestimated because the statistical yearbooks did not include household industries. Because of this deviation, close percentages are used instead of the actual figures which are less consistent. See also Yi Jeongok (1990: 163) and Bak Gyeongsik (1986: 481).

(Kunze seishi) formed bases in Daejeon in 1926 and Cheongju in 1929. Tōyō Silk Reeling, another Mitsui company, established plants in Jinhae in 1930 and in Sariweon and Pyongyang in 1933. The Kanegafuchi Spinning and Weaving Company formed a silk reeling mill in Seoul in November of 1925 and factories in Gwangju in 1930 and in Cheorweon in 1933. Other companies allied with the Mitsui group, such as Katakura Silk Reeling and Yamajū Silk Reeling, established bases in Seoul, Pyongyang, Daegu, Jeonju, and Hamheung throughout the 1930s (Jeong 1986, 159).

Few modes of production better symbolized the industrial revolution as the cotton textile industry. The cotton industry was paramount not only in its productive value and trade capacity but also in its establishment of modern facilities and operations. The first cotton mills in Korea, however, were not like the large-scale, technologically advanced factories in then contemporary Japan but small-scale workshops that hired an average of six employees. According to a Government-General report, there were 38 factories in the city of Seoul in 1913. Of these, five factories employed 11 to 40 persons, six employed 6 to 10 workers, five factories hired fewer than five, and family members ran seventeen handicraft workshops (Seki 1956, 4-13; Chōsen sōtokufu 1933, 38-9; Gweon 1989, 247-52).

Historians have contended that large-scale textile enterprises commenced with the founding of the Chōsen Spinning and Weaving Company (Chōsen bōseki kabushiki kaisha) by the Mitsui conglomerate in Busan in November 1917. In October 1919, the Gyeongseong Spinning and Weaving Company (Gyeongseong bangjik jusik hoesa) founded a base in Yeongdeungpo. While the different forms of spinning, weaving, knitting, and processing of fiber were overlooked by general observers, the varieties and stages of cotton textile production were complex. In its early stages, fiber production in Korea did not entail spinning and weaving since it was simply made into cords. Gyeongseong Textiles (Gyeongseong bangjik), for example, was founded in November 1911 by eighteen investors including Bak Yeongho and Kim Yeonsu as the Gyeongseong Cord Company (Gyeongseong jingnyu jusik hoesa). Representative of the domestically-oriented, early industrial climate, the Gyeongseong Company at the time produced cords or string (*jingnyu*) at a time when there was little demand for broadcloth (*jingmul*). While the company also produced some cloth and hosiery, the production of cords was ten times that of fabric (Suh 1978, 98-100; Grajdanzev 1944, 154; Bak 1989, 55; Gweon 1979, 300).

Although the post-WWI era was highlighted as the inaugural period of large-scale textile enterprises, fiber production in the 1920s relied more heavily on small- to medium-size workshops (*jungso gongeop*) and household industries (*ganae sugongeop*). Moreover, the processing of textiles was diversified and workshops tended to specialize in one or two particular aspects of production. According to a 1927 Government-General report, of the 135 textile factories in 1924, only fifty-three specialized in the production of woven cloth (*jingmuleop*). Two factories specialized in spinning (*yeonsaeop*), four in dyeing and bleaching (*yeomsaengeop*), sixteen companies processed raw silk (*saengsaep*), and sixty workshops concentrated on the initial processing of raw cotton, or cotton ginning (*jemyeoneop*). Large-scale textile companies that incorporated all of the procedures of spinning and weaving were formed in the late 1910s and 1920s, but their production capacities did not overwhelm smaller businesses. At the near peak of light industrial production, in 1929, approximately one half of all textiles exchanged in the peninsula were made by household industries.⁷

Until the 1930s, the textile industry in Korea had a precarious existence due to international competition. The arrival of Japanese spinning giants like the Tōyō and Kanegafuchi Spinning and Weaving companies by the 1930s drastically altered the climate of the Korean textile industry. Although the Mitsui group was the first to invest in the Korean market with the founding of the Busan Chōsen Textile Company in 1917, progress remained slow throughout the 1920s. Between 1930 and 1935, however, the Chōsen Textile Company formed bases in Daegu, Sariweon, Chinnampo, Weonju, and Daejeon. Also the Nanpoku Textile Company, a part of the Mitsui group, installed a plant in Janghang in 1936, and the Kanegafuchi Spinning and Weaving Company established bases in Gwangju in 1935 and in Seoul by December of the following year. In 1933, the Tōyō Spinning and Weaving Company, a part of the Sumitomo group, began plans to build a plant in Incheon with an approximate 4 million yen in invested capital. The Incheon factory began operations in 1934 and soon after, in 1937, another factory in Seoul commenced production. The arrival of Japanese businesses on the Korean Peninsula did not translate into a Japanese monopolization of the textile sector. The proliferation of Korean-owned knitting facto-

7. Chōsen sōtokufu. 1927. *Chōsen no bussan*. Commodities of Korea. Keijō: Chōsen sōtokufu. 496. Of approximately 17 million yen accumulated by textile production in 1929, factory output comprised 8.3 million yen whereas household industries yielded 8.7 million yen (Jeon Seoktam and Choe Unkyu 1959c, 1989: 232-3).

ries in 1930s Pyongyang confirms that Korean businesses also benefited from the rise of the textile industry (Jeong 1986, 159; Ju 1994).⁸

Though acknowledging the achievements of Japanese capitalists, nationalist scholars in Korea have maintained that the development of modern industry in Korea was divisive rather than integrative. As detailed by Sang-Chul Suh, large-scale industries “became complementary to Japan’s industries” and tended to “produce abrupt disturbances to and detrimental effects on native industries.” While such arguments are plausible inasmuch as the largest large-scale enterprises were Japanese-owned, other scholars including Carter Eckert and Ju Ik-Jong assert that Japanese industrial policies did not necessarily have detrimental effects on native enterprises. The fact that large-scale Korean businesses, such as Joseon Silk Reeling and Gyeongseong Spinning and Weaving, were founded during the WWI economic boom shows that colonial policy fostered the development of some native enterprises. Like Japanese and Korean spinning mills, knitting factories emerged in the late 1910s. In 1917, thirteen hosiery, or knitting, enterprises existed in Seoul including the Gwangmyeong and Samu companies and Daechang Hosiery.⁹ The number of Korean-owned hosiery factories increased throughout the 1920s and even more throughout the 1930s as efficient machinery allowed for greater production. By 1938, sixty-nine Korean-owned factories specializing in knitted wear existed in Pyongyang alone.

Associated with the rise of textile projects like knitting, spinning, and weaving was the development of coloring (*yeomsaek*) fabric as an independent industry. The pigmentation division of the Samgong Hosiery Company in Pyongyang formed a separate plant for dyeing and bleaching yarns in 1919. In the winter of 1921, the Dongyang Coloring Company (Dongyang yeomsaek jusik hoesa) was established in Seoul, and throughout the 1920s, factories concentrating on the

8. The Kanegafuchi Spinning and Weaving Company (Kanegafuchi bōseki kabushiki kaisha) was established in 1887 with one million yen in invested capital. By 1910, it was one of the six largest textile companies in Japan (Grajdanzev 1944c, 1978: 154). For more on Japanese textile giants in Korea, see Kanegafuchi bōseki kabushiki kaisha (1988) and Tōyō bōseki kabushiki (1986: 307-8).

9. Refer to Suh 1978: 99. In 1919, Min Byeongseok founded the Joseon Silk Reeling Company and Bak Yeongho founded the Gyeongseong Spinning and Weaving Company. Both companies began with an approximate 1 million yen in invested capital (Seong 1969: 59). The Gwangmyeong Company had workshops in Gongpyeongdong and Pyeongdong, the Samu Company in Gyeonamdong and Sogyeokdong. Daechang Hosiery formed bases in Gwanghwamun, Songhyeondong and Ineuidong (Ju 1994: 74). All three companies were founded in 1917.

dyeing of fabric like Baekhwa Dyes and Daedong Dyes were established.

The prosperity of Korean-owned businesses in the hosiery and coloring industries can be explained by the technological characteristics of these industries in colonial Korea. Manufacturing knitted wear required less machinery than cotton spinning and weaving and was thus more suitable for entrepreneurs with less start-up capital. Smaller than large-scale textile plants, knitting factories generally employed fewer than 100 persons. Although household industries with fewer than five employees still accounted for 15 to 20 percent of knitted wear production as a whole, hosiery production came to be dominated by medium-scale, Korean-owned enterprises throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Similarly, Korean-owned dyeing factories, requiring less machinery and fewer employees, proliferated into the late 1930s. The combined effects of technological and economic circumstance helped Korean businesses dominate certain aspects of textile production such as the knitting and dyeing of fabric.¹⁰

With drastic changes in economic policy after the formation of Manchukuo in 1932, the pace of industrialization quickened, causing changes in the labor force. Scholars have promoted the view that because industrial development underwent another stage of rapid mechanization in the 1930s, small-scale industries were overrun by large-scale enterprises. Although such interpretations present a clear-cut picture of linear progression, in reality, just as many new small-scale projects were initiated in conjunction with large-scale enterprises in the 1930s. Government focus shifted to heavy industries, but attention to large-scale projects did not stifle smaller factories. The 1930s initiated a period of take-off or rapid development when large- and small-scale projects prospered through collaboration, thus merging the two stages of industrialization. The male workforce, employed mainly in the heavy industries, experienced “quantitative and qualitative improvements” (Park 1999, 31). A focus on gender indicates that similar modes of expansion, whether they were improvements or not, were conspicuous in the female labor force. For example, the proportion of women workers composing the total child workforce grew steadily throughout the period.

10. The Pyongyang knitting industry underwent budget cuts to compete with rival Chinese firms in Sineuiju in the late 1920s and the early 1930s. As the competition diminished with the Japanese takeover of Manchuria, however, Korean-owned knitting industries once again prospered throughout the 1930s. Some of the larger knitting companies in Pyongyang were: Sechang Hosiery, Samgong Hosiery, Daedong Knitting, Daeseongsa, Daesan Hosiery, Weolseong Hosiery, Ilsin Hosiery, Donggwang Knitting, Baekhwa Hosiery, Taeyang Hosiery, Choheung Knitting, and Joseon Knitting (Ju 1994: 116-9, 173-4).

Girls under fifteen years of age composed 46.1 percent of the child workforce in 1925. This figure increased dramatically to 76.1 percent in 1930, and over two-thirds of the child labor force was composed of females throughout the colonial era. The high proportion of female child workers, examined alongside women's higher rates of migration to Manchuria and Japan, indicates that women workers continued their prominence across industries and forms of wage work (Gang 1993, 181; Jeong 1988, 65).

Filatures and textile mills tended to recruit unmarried girls but other industries including food processing, rubber, ceramics, and metal production hired older women. As evidenced by the Government-General of Korea's statistical yearbooks, while the proportion of women workers in the textile and food processing industries decreased by the 1940s, the percentage of women workers increased in all other industries including metals, machinery, ceramics, chemicals, lumber, printing, and gas and electricity. A review of women workers in the chemical and machine tools industries reveals that, by the last decade of colonial rule, industrial occupations for women had expanded and diversified beyond the conventional bounds of textile industries.¹¹

Because of its technology and scale, much scholarly attention has been paid to the rise of the chemical industry and the establishment of mega-scale enterprises such as the Korean Hydroelectric Corporation (Chōsen suiryoku tenki) in 1926 and the Korean Nitrogen Fertilizer Corporation (Chōsen chissō hiryo) in 1927, funded by Noguchi Jun and the Mitsubishi group respectively. By the late 1930s, these companies formed one of the largest electrical-chemical industrial complexes in East Asia. Also in the late 1930s, other large-scale chemical enterprises, including the Korean Nitrogen Gunpowder Company (Chōsen chissō kayaku) and the Korean Gunpowder Manufacturing Company (Chōsen kayaku seizō), were founded. Nevertheless, the majority of chemical projects were not large-scale. As Grajdanzev noted, the chemical industry (*hwahak gongeop*) in colonial Korea presented a somewhat strange picture: a small number of giant plants on the one hand and numerous small enterprises with "primitive techniques, making fish oil, fish fertilizers," vegetable oils and rubber footwear on the other.¹²

11. Refer to footnote #6, 'percentage Distribution of Male and Female Workers across Industries, 1921-1943.'

12. The project was launched by Noguchi Jun, with invested capital of 20 million and 10 million yen for the respective companies. In 1926, a project to construct the Bujeon River Dam was

While the rubber industry was one of the most important businesses in terms of output, a small to medium scale of production characterized it. Like the knitting and coloring industries, factories manufacturing rubber shoes (*gomusin*) were early modern mills with technology that was developed before the emergence of large-scale enterprises. Some of the larger companies in the Pyongyang area were Seojo Rubbers, founded in 1922, Sechang Rubbers, formed in 1927, and Geumgang Rubber Company, established in 1929. The production of rubber shared characteristics with that of knitting inasmuch as a majority of the businesses were Korean-owned. But it was unique in its tendency toward joint ownership (*hapja*). Although in 1924 the two businessmen Kim Dongweon and Yi Yeongha established Pyeongan Rubbers (Pyeongan gomu), rubber mills were more often financed by several investors. Donga and Chungchang Rubber companies were each founded by five men in 1921 and 1922. Similarly, six entrepreneurs formed Daedong Rubber Company in 1923, and seven businessmen founded Dongyang Rubber Company in 1926. Seogyong Rubber Company, established in 1925, was initiated by the joint effort of eleven investors.¹³

Founded in the late 1910s and 1920s,¹⁴ the rubber industry prospered throughout the 1930s. The production value of rubber footwear increased from 10.5 million yen in 1935 to 17 million yen in 1937, a 62 percent increase in the span of two years. Aside from statistical evidence, newspaper reports also demonstrate how the rubber shoe industry was able to remain competitive over such a lengthy period of time. As described by an editorial in the *Seojo ilbo*, a rubber shoe industry that relied on the demands of rural and local society was

initiated, and by January 1930, the Korean nitrogen fertilizer plant began operations using power from the Bujeon Water Power Station (Park 1999: 87-88; Suh, 1978: 100). Before 1933, the Japanese government in Korea did not permit the establishment of any gunpowder factories, but with increasing militarization in the late 1930s such prohibitions were reversed (Grajdanzev 1944c, 1978: 160-3).

13. In terms of production value, the leading chemical enterprises were as follows in 1935: the production of fertilizers yielded an approximate 55.0 million yen; the production sulfate of ammonia, 28.2 million; the production of fish oil, 17.4 million; the production of fish fertilizers, 14.5 million; the production of rubber footwear, 10.5 million (*Tonga ilbo*, January 1, 1928; *Jungwoe ilbo*, August 20, 1930). Many owners of rubber companies in the Pyongyang area were also owners of other enterprises, with the most prominent being rice polishing (*chungmi*), hosiery (*yangmal*), and linen (*pomok*).
14. Although the majority of rubber factories were Korean-owned, Japanese-owned rubber factories existed as well. Some of the larger companies were: Naitoku Rubbers in Pyongyang, Asahi Rubbers in Busan, Nissei Rubbers in Daegu, Chōsen Rubbers in Incheon, the Chōsen Rubber Company in Seoul, and the Sanwa Rubber Company.

able to prosper throughout the 1930s, while export-processing industries suffered from the global Depression (Grajdanzev 1944, 160-6; Ju 1994, 108, 166).¹⁵

Women comprised a small percentage of miners as a whole, but their dramatic increase in numbers during the late 1930s and early 1940s illustrates the changing nature of women's work in the latter years of colonial rule. According to a 1933 Government-General survey, approximately 3 percent of the mining (*gwangeop*) labor force was female. By 1941, their composition more than doubled to 7.3 percent. Female miners generally worked outside of the shaft in collieries of Hwanghae and South Hamgyeong provinces which specialized in coal (*seoktan*) and pig iron (*seoncheol*) mining. In coal mines, women worked in screening, or sorting, coal or stacked coal ready for coking. In iron mining, women removed cinders from furnaces, unloaded at the tips, and chipped bits of iron ore with small picks. They also took iron ore from trams, sorted out the stone and shale, and cleaned the ore. By 1941, the restriction on women working inside the pit (*gaengnae*) was lifted and women began strenuous work inside the shafts. Although the number of women workers in collieries most likely did not exceed 50,000, their emergence and expansion into heavy industrial work illustrates significant changes in the varieties of women's industrial labor by the 1940s (Chōsen sōtokufu gakumukyoku shakaika 1933, 316; Miya 1945, 44).

Conclusion

One of the most popular perceptions of mechanization was its detrimental impact on the traditional family system. Each stage in industrial differentiation and specialization "struck at the family economy, disturbing customary relations between man and wife, parents and children" and differentiating more sharply work and life (Thompson 1963: 416). Meanwhile the family was roughly "torn apart each morning by the factory bell." Whereas premodern modes of production centered on the household, as family members began to earn wages, the family wage economy emerged. When families became wage earning instead of producing units, family members no longer shared a common interest in the

15. The growth rate of the rubber shoe industry was comparable to the growth rate of the fertilizer industry, including nitrogen fertilizer. Whereas in 1935, the production value of fertilizers was 55 million yen, it rose to 90.5 million yen in 1937 - an increase of approximately 61 percent (*Sejo ilbo*, February 21, 1938).

property guaranteeing their livelihood. In depicting how industrialization influenced women, scholars have asserted that while women's productive activity was high in the pre-industrial household economy, it declined in industrializing economies.

Women's labor historians of the 1970s and 80s, including Scott and Tilly, inspired groundbreaking perspectives of the modern history of women's work. Nonetheless, their conclusions reaffirm the ideas of earlier scholars who maintained that "women became more dependent upon the employer or labor market" as they looked back on a "golden past" of autonomy in household industries (Scott and Tilly 1978, 119, 229). Such interpretations point to the fact that women in traditional and modern societies held the reigns over family funds and its allocation. Still, overemphasizing a woman's authority in premodern domesticity suggests that industry, or public sectors, undermined this authority. Closer examination of the Korean case, however, shows that domestic and non-domestic accomplishments were not necessarily antagonistic. Not only female industrial workers but men also balanced the demands of the private and public spheres throughout their life spans.

To understand working women's motives in colonial Korea requires placing these individuals within peasant households and largely rural communities. Sociologists have debated whether rural beliefs and actions are primarily moral or political. These discussions generally focus on peasant consciousness in terms of social movements and examine economy rather than culture, but they also outline the possible motives for worker's activism. Based on a moral interpretation, first expressed by James Scott, peasants who were traditionally constrained by the "vagaries of weather and tributes in cash, labor, and kind" sought "safety first" before seeking profit or material accumulation. Other scholars, like Samuel Popkin, challenge the moral view by asserting that though peasants sought stability, they sometimes compromised this stability for future rewards and that they were "forward-looking" planners, rather than those who solely embraced subsistence-based lifestyles. Still other scholars state that wealthier peasants were political whereas poorer peasants were moral, but the majority of Korean peasants took risks and maintained stability in their everyday ventures.¹⁶ For unmarried peasant girls, the implications of their wage work varied. Some

16. Scott 1976: 1-5, 15; James Scott. 1977. "egemony and the Peasantry." *Politics and Society* 7 (July): 267-96. Popkin 1979: 17-21.

young women, for example, saved their wages to give to their parents, thus showing the more conservative characteristics of the family economy in a wage economy setting. When working daughters lived at home, their wages unquestionably became a part of the family fund. If working and living elsewhere, they still fulfilled their functions in the family economy. Whether they sent their wages back home or not, simply by moving to factories, daughters aided the family economy by relieving families of the burden of economic support.

Women workers of the colonial era have been depicted as moral agents who were quiescent actors moved by security-based impulses. A closer review of the motives for factory work, however, indicates that while women might have joined the workforce to appease parental pressures, they were simultaneously planning for their future welfare. In a time and place where a woman's greatest ambition in life was marriage, a dowry functioned as her only chance for social mobility. Most of these women could not rely on networks of kin to provide for their future material welfare and therefore sought to resolve the matter themselves. Just as nineteenth-century commoner girls became domestic servants to compensate for inadequate family funds, factory women aimed to strengthen their financial position and improve their marriageability. While their motives for work were drawn from tradition, the ways in which young women accomplished their aims altered greatly by the latter years of the colonial era.

For many women, waged employment altered their positions within their families during important stages of their lives. Working away from home, women became more physically independent of family control. But the effects of mill life were also psychological. Factory work brought on drastic changes of habits and surroundings; these changes incited different modes of identification. For the first time in their lives, industrial labor prompted young women to view their social positions outside of the reference points of family and community. Commencement of work was a rite of passage and many entered the factory as children but left matured, having coped with the productive responsibilities of adults and men. Individually, wage work prompted revisions in life-plans, priorities, and expectations. Industrial labor was a transitional experience in the trajectory of life stages. Particularly for young women workers of late colonial Korea, their factory years served as a halfway point between childhood and adulthood.

Factory women were transitional figures in their family histories. In early twentieth-century Korea, since most factory girls grew up poor, the reasons for sending daughters to work relied on family economies. Material and emotional autonomy, just as codependence and motherhood, were not possible without the

cooperative interaction between individual time, family time, work time, and historical time at varying points in these women's lives. The needs and wishes of the collective groups surrounding the individual were thus inseparable from personal aspirations. Nevertheless, wage work extended beyond this economic function and influenced women's views of themselves, their life plans, and their aspirations. Entering the workforce led rural girls to consider the possibilities of future careers for the first time. Young women of colonial Korea labored in the factory for only a few years, but most of these women continued to work for wages throughout their lives. Women improved their financial positions through wage work and achieved an educated, respected status, if not for themselves, for their children.

Factory women were also transitional figures in the social history of twentieth-century Korea. As scholars of economic and women's history have revealed, industrialization did not occur in a revolutionary manner but was a progression of sporadic economic development. The occupational transition from farmer to factory worker to professional rarely occurred within a single generation. Working women of the colonial era were members of this transitional generation that influenced the social progression of the latter half of the twentieth century. The experiences of working women in twentieth-century Korea indicate that modernization was and remains a progression that extends beyond periodic boundaries. Although female factory workers of the late colonial era embraced progressive positions in economy and society, they simultaneously held to their conservative roots as transitional figures in personal, familial, political, and historical continua.

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