

WOMEN'S CREATIVE ADAPTATION TO GENDER ROLES IN
NORTH AND SOUTH KOREA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

by

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A THESIS

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Women's gender roles in the Korean context are complex, variable, and alive. Actors within all societies grapple with the elements and ideologies of their surrounding milieu by creatively adapting components and reshaping them to create change. This study investigates ways Korean women adapt to the confines of patriarchy in two separate contexts: The North Korean famine of 1994 and South Korean feminist movements of the 21st century. While these settings offer two distinct societies and cultures, this comparative analysis reveals striking similarities and notable differences in the way actors leverage change. Specifically, in North Korea, women have largely dominated black markets via marriage and engaged in sex work, superseding the barriers of the famine and limits of the patriarchy. In South Korea, feminist women influence online spaces, sparking movements and encouraging ways women can take steps to change their everyday routine and expectations, such as not engaging in marriage, to weaken patriarchal expectations. Through the in-depth analysis of both primary and secondary sources, I examine North and South Korean case studies to uncover how the patriarchy intersects with Confucianism, socialism, and capitalism and how these dynamics shape everyday life choices of women. By tracing these narratives, this study identifies revolutions of change that utilize social structures to break free from the shackles of patriarchy.

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Author's Note

It should be noted that this thesis' use of the terminology "women" does not intend to perpetuate the harmful perception that gender is only defined within the binary. The author recognizes gender to be a socially constructed concept that is rooted in social norms which have harmed and subjugated individuals for many centuries. This thesis aims to uncover the raw experiences of individuals who identify as women and live in the highly patriarchal society of North and South Korea. Gender is made up of expectations a society creates, and the author investigates ways actors can take components of Korean womanhood to produce creative outlets to systems of oppression.

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Introduction

The construction of gender roles expansively infiltrates cultural expectations and dictate the day-to-day lives of both men and women. Patriarchal gender roles, particularly, create systems in which uphold hegemonic male dominance over women. Most countries across the globe are embedded with notions of patriarchal structures, including North and South Korea. Under the demanding pressures of the patriarchy, women exist as oppressed subjects of their society. However, their oppression is not willfully accepted, rather, they are powerfully resisted. The current research seeks to find a deeper understanding of ways North and South Korean women manage their subjugation specific to their distinct cultures and contexts. Specifically, the research delves into two case studies: 1. Women in famine struck 1990s North Korea, and 2. Women in 21st century South Korea. Both cases uniquely offer snapshots into ways women creatively operate within their societal bounds to leverage specific elements of their culture to uplift their social positionality and promote survival. Eventually, these creative decisions can produce significant cultural change.

The North Korean famine case study works to investigate ways women adapted a culmination of cultural factors—Confucianism, socialism, and North Korean *Juche* ideology—to survive through the hardships of the famine in forms of working in black markets or sex work. On the other hand, South Korean women, amid the pressure of 21st century's growing anti-feminist rhetoric, utilize pieces of their society—such as Confucianism, capitalism, individualism and mirrored patriarchy—to modulate their everyday oppression into a more livable reality. A comparative analysis of the two Koreas offers compelling insight into how their shared history shapes similarities in their cultures, while also highlighting how their differences lead to distinct ways in which women navigate patriarchy in North and South Korea.

The research utilizes Berk and Galvan's (2009) framework of *creative syncretism* which conceptualizes every person within a society as a viable actor that interacts with existing components of their society and recombine them in a way that produces a reality that fits their needs. In essence, *creative syncretism* can be likened to the social science equivalent of the *Conservation of Energy* (energy is neither created nor destroyed)—where “new” and shifting culture all originate from the recombination of already existing culture. Actors have the *creative agency* to recompile any and all elements within their societies—whether past or present-- and tinker with these components to create new realities.

The current thesis is organized into 5 primary sections. The first section conducts a literature review showcasing and critiquing the existing research related to the topic of North and South Korean women's gender roles. Then, the second section covers shared Korean history predating back to the Joseon Dynasty and up until the end of the Korean war. This is essential to enhance the reader's understanding of the “shared resources” of culture—specifically Confucianism and patriarchal expectations—that shape both North and South Korean gender dynamics. The third and fourth section presents the North and South Korean case study, respectively. These sections function in parallel with one another, where primary section headings in the North Korean case study (section three) are purposefully mirrored in the South Korean case study (section four). The specific formatting functions to signpost a creatively syncretic narrative arc: moving from “the resources,” referring to the available and usable components to the actors of the specific society; “handling the pieces of the living,” noting the observable methods and actions actors take to handle and repurpose the “resources” of their society to promote survival; and lastly, “Reassemblage in the Present” referring to ways creative action precipitates into visible, cultural change. Section three and four's organization style

reveals a common narrative arc illustrating creative syncretism and becomes more easily comparable between two different case studies. Lastly, the fifth section “Adapted Realities” engages in an in-depth comparative analysis between North and South Korean women, drawing broader conclusions about mechanisms behind shifts in gender roles. Additionally, there is discussion on potential limitations of the research and future directions.

Research Questions

In this thesis, I set out to explore and answer the following questions:

1. How have women in North Korea during the famine of 1994 adapted components of their society to best serve their needs under North Korean communist principles of motherhood?
2. How do women in South Korea adapt components of their society to best serve their needs under growing anti-feminist rhetoric and the patriarchy?
3. How do South Korean women and North Korean women's responses differ or resemble one another? What factors contribute to these differences and similarities?

Analytical Framing and Methodology

I conducted a qualitative analysis to investigate ways in which North and South Korean women utilize and adapt components of their respective societies to alleviate the pressures of patriarchal gender roles and expectations. Dennis Galvan and Gerald Berk's idea of creative syncretism, the guiding framework utilized in my analysis, describes society as a malleable and decomposable landscape wherein actors can creatively enact change with different existing societal resources (Berk & Galvan, 2009). Creative syncretism embraces people's agency and interprets societal shifts as a phenomenon resulting from people's individual, everyday choices in reconfiguring the building blocks of their social milieu. Such resources or components of society includes *any* part of society that builds a culture. Whether that would be in the form of a book, an online post, a gender stereotype or expectations, all can be considered viable resources under the creative syncretic framework. For this specific case study, I focus on the ways women as actors handle the pieces specifically within their culture's gender landscape to best serve their needs in patriarchal North and South Korea.

To track North and South Koreans' interactions with components, I approach my research through Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT); the theory which posits that all aspects of society function and shift in relation to each other, creating a web between all actors, both inanimate and animate (Latour, 2005). My research utilizes Latour's framework by tracing connections between actors to uncover a narrative that illustrates the changes seen in South and North Korean gender politics. Rather than explaining observed change via elusive gender theories or institutional reasonings, I utilize key components from both primary and secondary sources to map out actors' decisions and consequent action. Primary sources from North Korea include Kim Il Sung's speeches and films, North Korean literature, and documented accounts of

defectors' perspectives—all of which I was able to access from different databases such as the University of Oregon Library, Google Scholar, and JStor. I incorporate insights from existing scholarships to supplement my analysis of primary sources and illuminate aspects of North Korean society those other scholars, with broader access to primary materials, have been able to uncover. I approach my research as an excavation, marking and connecting elements found from each source into a narrative that describes the everyday actions of North Korean women.

For South Korea, I investigate primary sources that include feminist literature, social media content, and news that contribute to the growing gender tensions in South Korea. Since the nature of South Korea's gender divide is driven and exacerbated by online communities, accessing the internet for the purpose of this research was essential for understanding feminist and anti-feminist rhetoric in South Korean society. Secondary sources helped bolster and confirm my findings from media outlets and outlined the tenets of specific feminist movements. All sources were sourced through the University of Oregon Library, Google Scholar, JStor, NIH, YouTube, and Korean news sources (i.e. The Korean Herald).

In order to organize my observations and reveal pathways between actors, I employed the method of "Pile sorting." While pile sorting is traditionally utilized by anthropologists in categorizing perspectives from interviews, I instead pile sorted essential information from the primary and secondary source materials I engaged with throughout my research. More specifically, I categorized my observations and notes of these sources into categories in a way that streamlined and connected themes, events, and actions between actors. By following these connections, I was able to construct a narrative reflecting the everyday experience of North and South Korean women in their utilization of pieces within their network to adapt to their needs under the patriarchy.

Why Compare Different Time Periods?

This thesis takes a unique approach to a comparative analysis between North and South Korean gender roles by examining the two case studies in different time periods, 1990s and the 21st century, respectively. Traditionally, it may seem more logical to compare across the same period, but there is merit to conducting this thesis in a staggered timeline especially in the lens of creative syncretism. By drawing similarities about the ways actors navigate gender roles within their different social milieus may reveal something more novel than analyzing parallel timelines. This type of comparative analysis has the power to uncover common themes and conditions that cause actors to respond in similar ways or can reveal common pathways women utilize in the face of the patriarchy. Furthermore, considering North and South Korea share more history together than apart, locating the differences between gendered responses will speak to ways their contexts produce nuanced reactions. Galvan and Berk's (2009) creative syncretism centers on the individual decisions of actors leading to social survival and ultimately change. Time should not and does not constrain the scope of creative syncretism.

Literature Review

Existing Literature: Changing Gender Roles in North and South Korea

To date, existing literature that research North and South Korean women's gender roles tend to assert institutionalist reasonings to explain cultural change. Specifically, scholars that have researched North Korea's gender roles at the time of the famine in 1994, such as Chang and Jeong (2015), posit that North Korea experienced gender role shifts due to the import of individualism. Scholars argue that North Korea's increased exposure to more individualist perspectives ultimately encouraged women to become involved in breadwinning activities within the black market at the time of the famine (Chang & Jeong, 2015). I push against this notion as this perspective strips women of their agency and leaves change in the hands of elusive top-down structures of a sudden, unexplained shift to individualism.

Similarly, scholarship examining South Korean women's departure from traditional gender roles also utilize top-down perspectives to illustrate change—often referencing South Korea's entrenchment in capitalism as the primary and only explanation to South Korea's experiencing shifts in gender roles (Park, 1992a). While these arguments have merit in considering why change occurs, the institutionalist perspective is not wholistic because it fails to consider the role actors' decisions have in precipitating change. Institutionalism supposes there is a black and white reality where the import of ideologies automatically results in a drastic change in culture.

Additionally, there is existing literature by scholar Kyung Ae Park (1992a) conducting a comparative analysis between North and South Korean women's gender roles in 1990s; though, the primary focus of the research centered on the institutional influences of Marxist and capitalist societies. Specifically, the research argues the anti-feudalist drives of Marxist structures

ultimately benefited North Korean women more than her South Korean counterparts by equalizing their role in the workforce. Furthermore, Park (1992a) argues that the institutionalization of traditional practices in capitalist South Korea hindered gender equality in contrast to North Korean society. While it is true that North Korean policies were more explicitly committed toward achieving gender equality in the workplace, there are far more elements and resources within both North and South Korea to explore to paint a fuller picture of why gender roles developed into what they are today. It is reductionist to only consider institutional structures of capitalism and Marxism as the only reason for change.

Creative syncretism pushes back against ideas of institutionalism, viewing societies through a lens full of shifting colors. Creative syncretism asserts that actors' decisions on *how* they choose to interact with the systems are the central force that leads to cultural shifts. Within this framework, systemic institutions are not disregarded, rather, they become resources that actors handle and act upon. Additionally, change is fluid and does not occur in phases as institutionalists might argue—culture is forever assembled and reassembled by the everyday decisions of the actors within a society (Berk & Galvan, 2009). Currently, there is no existing literature exploring North and South Korean women's gender roles in such a way.

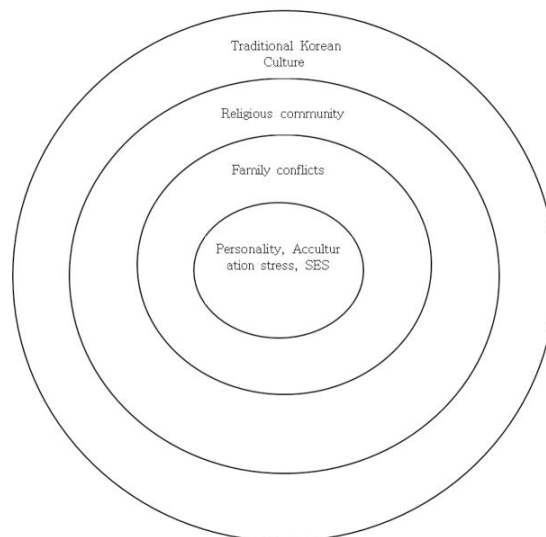
Psychological perspectives on South Korean Gender Roles

Moreover, South Korean psychological research on the effects of gender roles also creates a model that both problematizes and withholds a woman's agency in her reactions to traditional Korean culture. A Korean woman's internalized anger is pathologized as a cultural psychological syndrome known as *hwa-byung*, translated as “fire illness” (Rhi, 2004). In 1967 and 1970, Korean psychologists began recognizing *hwa-byung* as a psychological disorder, clinically defining it as a condition of “mismanaging” anger; a condition most often associated

with middle-aged, married women (Rhi, 2004; Lee, et al., 2014). Specifically, different psychological models suggest traditional Confucian beliefs in the family setting, coupled with cultural discouragement of women expressing discontent, result in the "mismanagement" of her anger (Lee et al., 2014). As a result, symptoms of *hwa-byung* are listed as: insomnia, difficulty breathing, resentment, "sense of impending insanity or death," "divorce from spouse," and "running away from home" (Lee, et al., 2014). Reasoning that a combination of cultural norms and pressures systemically lead to a pathologized symptom of "leaving one's husband" or "running away" strips the actor of her agency in her decision to leave her husband or run away. Instead, the psychological diagnosis, like institutionalism, ascribes that under a certain "A" condition or system "B" will naturally occur. This notion is restrictive.

Particularly, Lee and colleagues' (2014) proposed Multi-Systemic Model of *Hwa-byung* (MSMH; shown below in *Figure 1.*) attempts to outline ways Korean social systems contribute to the woman's internalization of anger and manifestation of *hwa-byung*.

Figure 2. The Multi-Systemic Model of Hwa-Byung (Lee et al., 2014).



The MSMH considers traditional Korean culture, religious community and interpersonal family conflicts components that lead to the emergence of *hwa-byung*. Lee and colleagues (2014) argue

that traditional Korean culture, shapes social norms that discourage women from expressing anger and subordinate women under their husbands and in-laws. Out of such conditions, Lee and colleagues (2014) conclude that a woman will then begin expressing symptoms of *hwa-byung*. While the MSMH clearly identifies societal pressures that lead to a South Korean woman's distress, the very essence of making her anger diagnosable inherently implies two problematic messages: 1. that a woman's harbored frustration due to patriarchal norms is considered the problem needed to be treated rather than the system itself, and 2. that a woman's experience of resentment or ending her marriage is a condition that emerges purely due to her environment, failing to acknowledge her power and agency in her own decisions.

Shared Resources: Korea's Historical Context

To start, it is important to recognize the shared history between North and South Korea. This section inspects Korea's historical context with a focus on gender starting from the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) and ending with the division into North and South Korea (1945) and Korean war (1950-53). While there is a vast amount of other shared history that occurred before this research's timeline, Joseon Dynasty's adoption of Confucianism, an extremely patriarchal ideology in nature, is particularly salient for this study and permeates both North and South Korean societies.

Confucianism and Gender in Joseon Dynasty Korea

Neo-Confucian ideology dominated schools of thought in the Joseon dynasty, pushing aside previous practices of Buddhism prominent during the Koryo Dynasty (918 -1392) (Yang & Henderson, 1958). King Yi Song-gye, the founder of the Joseon dynasty, spearheaded the spread of neo-Confucianism and fundamentally changed societal values, practices, and everyday life (Yang & Henderson, 1958). Particularly, Confucianism emphasizes the importance of rituals and societal order and organizes society into three primary relationships: the king and the subject, father and son, and husband and wife (Kim, 2022). Depending on the type of relationship, Confucianism established a hierarchy between roles and developed certain ethical norms that were expected to be upheld by every individual (Kim, 2022). Those that strayed from the expectations were deeply criticized for disrupting the harmonies of society (Kim, 2022).

The husband-and-wife Confucian relationship, specifically, is gendered in nature. Primarily, Confucianism asserted that women must be obedient subjects to their husbands (Park, 1992a). In practice, Confucian society segregated men and women from one another from the young age of 7 years old, establishing a strong sense of assigned roles to both men and women

(Park, 1992a). Specifically, women were designated to the interior portion of the home to attend to domestic duties, referred to as *anchae* (안채); while men were kept in outer parts of the home to define their role in outward, public life known as *sarangchae* (사랑채) (Park, 1992a). This separation of gender was further asserted through a law known as *naewoebop* (내외법; “inside-outside law”) aimed to restrict women’s daily lives in order to reduce as much inter-gender contact as possible (Han, 2004). For instance, women could not visit monasteries or temples and were required to wear a garment that hid their faces while in public (Han, 2004). Confucian society also stripped women of their right to own property and did not have rights to inheritance as it was designated only to the eldest son (Park, 1992a). In other words, Confucianism did not recognize women as a viable subject in society and effectively positioned women inferior to men (Manek, 2023).

Korean women were also expected to obey men, and if they failed to do so, resulted in the viable expulsion from their family (Park, 1992a). Grounds which justified the expulsion of a “disobedient” woman were delineated by the *chilgo chiak* or seven evils (Park, 1992a). The seven evils are as follows: the woman 1. goes against her parents-in-law, 2. does not bear a son, 3. commits acts of adultery, 4. instills jealousy in her husband, 5. Carries a hereditary disease, 6. Malicious gossip, and 7. engages in theft (Park, 1992a). Confucianism justified such stringent social rules as it was believed if women avoided any of the seven evils, it would be beneficial for her own relationships but also for the greater good of the community (Park, 1992a). Furthermore, a woman’s obedience to her husband was also expected in the sexual context where a woman was always expected to oblige to her husband’s sexual desires, even in the case of rape (Han, 2004).

During the Joseon Dynasty, women were held to the ideal of becoming a “virtuous” woman by maintaining her chastity before marriage, fulfilling her role as a good daughter (and later, daughter-in-law), and importantly to be a good wife (Han, 2004). The chastity of an unmarried woman was so valued that Joseon Korea implemented extreme laws punishing any woman who tainted her chastity—even in the context of rape (Han, 2004). To become “virtuous women,” women were expected to unquestionably support her father, husband, and son by exercising the four virtues: exercising good domestic skills, or *pugong*, to be virtuous, have proper speech, and to have “delicate” physical features (Han, 2004). Furthermore, Confucian society highly valued the institution of marriage as it was central to preserving family lineage. To assert the importance of marriage, in 1427, King Sejong passed a law mandating that women be married between the ages of 14-20 and men be married between 16-30; if people did not meet this standard, they were subject to state punishment (Han, 2004).

However, toward the end of the Joseon Dynasty (late 1800s), new waves of thought permeated the Korean peninsula. Imported thought from Christian missionaries as well as Silhak (practical learning) and Tonghak (eastern learning) emphasized the importance of women’s education and began to proliferate Korean society (Park, 1992a). This led to the establishment of the first women’s college in 1886, Ewha Womans University, and the rise of numerous women’s rights groups (Park, 1992a). Therefore, women began gaining access to education and employment, giving rise to the concept of the “New Women” (Park, 1992a). The education of women strayed from traditional Confucian ideals where women became far “less restricted” (Manek, 2023). “New women” challenged standard Confucian relationships, participating in non-traditional, premarital sexual relationships, breaking the norms of sustaining chastity before

marriage (Manek, 2023). That said, traditional Korean men often perceived “New women’s” actions in pushing relational boundaries as unattractive (Manek, 2023).

Japanese Occupation, Gender, and Women’s Rights Groups

While the end of the Joseon dynasty offered small glimpses of a slight breakage of strict gender roles, the preceding Japanese occupation beginning in 1910 quickly altered Korean society. Considering that the Japanese Colonial Period lasted for a 35-year period (from 1910-1945), it is crucial to investigate the ways Japanese culture and conceptualization of gender infiltrated Korean society on a systemic level. Confucian values were also prevalent in Japanese culture where the Edo period (1603-1867) practiced similar gendered expectations as Joseon Dynasty Korea (Park, 1992a). As an example, women had no right to property, suffrage, and choice in marriage—almost identical to values in Korea’s Joseon dynasty (Min, 2003; Park, 1992a). Furthermore, the Japanese government under both the Edo period (1603-1867) and Meiji period (1868-1912) institutionalized and legalized prostitution (Min, 2003). The Meiji government constructed systems upholding military sexual slavery as Japan believed prostitution to be the only means a woman contribute to the war efforts and soldiers themselves (Min, 2003).

These institutionalized practices of prostitution ultimately carried over into the Japanese occupation of Korea, resulting in a mass detainment of Korean women for the purpose of sexual slavery during the Asian Pacific War (1932-1945) (Min, 2003). Throughout the war, a total of around 200,000 women, majority who were Korean, faced harrowing atrocities of military sexual slavery and were referred to as “Comfort Women” (Min, 2003). Comfort Women’s experiences were a horrific violation of human rights, but due to the firm Confucian values surrounding the protection of a woman’s chastity, most Korean women remained silent about their sufferings until around 45 years after the war (Min, 2003; Manek, 2023). This tells us two important things

about the landscape of gender dynamics at the time of the Japanese colonial period: 1. Values from Confucianism in the Joseon Dynasty, such as a woman's chastity, continued into the Japanese Colonial period, and 2. The Japanese government imposed patriarchal expectations onto the shoulders of Korean women.

The Japanese colonial government also imported their 1898 Japanese Civil Code into colonized Korea, organizing a patriarchal and patrilineal system of citizen registration (Yune, 2005). Under the Civil Code, people were legally defined within family units known as *Ie* in Japanese and *Hoju-je* in Korean (Moon & Kim Choe, 2020). Such units were defined based upon an individual's relationship with their eldest male relative, known as the *hoju*. Upon the death of a *hoju*, the position was passed down in a patrilineal fashion (Moon & Kim Choe, 2020). The Civil Code granted the *hoju* power to dictate any economic, political or social rights of anyone within his family unit (Moon & Kim Choe, 2020). Evidently, the *hoju* system implemented by the Japanese colonial period continued to uphold patriarchal structures by legally placing women's agency in the hands of men.

In addition, women's movements that began in the Joseon Dynasty were quickly silenced upon Japan's colonization of Korea (Park, 1992a). Working secretly, women's groups in Korea utilized their platform primarily to contribute to Korea's fight for independence (Park, 1992a). For instance, the Patriotic Women's League and Korean Patriotic Women's Society intertwined socialist-based ideals in their movement, believing that by revolutionizing the proletariat both women and their nation could become free (Park, 1992a). However, many of these women's groups existed as underground movements and ultimately did not change Japanese colonizers or the Korean people's sentiment towards women's inferior status. Instead, these women's groups

contributed to the image of Korean women playing a central role in the fight for independence (Park, 1992a).

The Split

Leading up to and immediately following Korea's independence from Japan in August of 1945, different Korean political groups began to emerge. One of the most notable movements being the Committee for the Preparation for Korean Independence (CPKI) led by Lyuh Unhyong composed primarily of leftists (Kim, 1988). CPKI became a prominent party in both northern and southern regions of Korea with over 145 people's committees nationwide (Kim, 1988). By September 6th, 1945, the CPKI formally established themselves as the temporary national government known as the People's Republic of Korea (PRK) (Kim, 1988).

However, despite the Korean peoples' efforts to ground their own form of governance post-liberation, the Soviet Union and United States quickly inserted themselves upon the Korean peninsula by September 1945. Both the US and USSR tentatively agreed to divide their forces among Korea's 38th parallel and their decision was later corroborated by the Moscow Conference in December 1945; the US stationed in the south and USSR in the north (Kim, 2024). Upon the USSR and US arrival, each approached the PRK with their own respective perspectives. The US perceived the PRK as an unruly and violent communist group, ultimately leading to the United States' complete removal of PRK from power and replacing government structures with their own "US Army Military Government in Korea" from 1945 – 1948 (USAMGIK) (Kim, 1988). Due to the USAMGIK's general ignorance to Korean politics and mistrust in Koreans, many Japanese officials from the colonial period were kept in power and advised the US's rule (Kim, 1988). The USAMGIK's decision in appointing Japanese officials largely stemmed from their primary goal of staving off communism in line with the Truman

Doctrine of 1947 (Kim, 2023). As a result, many similar Japanese colonial structures were enforced, such as exploitative land ownership laws (Stueck & Yi, 2010).

On the other hand, the USSR embraced the structure of the PRK, re-establishing the North Korean Bureau of the Korean Communist Party on October 20th, 1945 (Kim, 2023). The USSR appointed Kim Il-Sung as chair in 1946, leading to rapid reform in the North in attempts to heal from the scars of colonization (Kim, 2023). By 1948, North Korean people founded the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) under Kim Il-Sung's rule, while southern Korea established the Republic of Korea (ROK) under US appointed president Syngman Rhee.

In 1950, with Stalin's approval, North Korean troops infiltrated South Korea, and the Korean war broke out. Throughout the three years of the Korean war, US troops flocked to South Korea to protect against North Korean communist forces (Kim, 2023). In hopes to sustain good allyship with the US, the ROK offered prostitution sites known as "comfort stations" for US and UN soldiers, functioning similarly to the comfort women during the Japanese Colonial period (Choe, 2023). On the flipside, the USSR and China contributed artillery and manpower to North Korea (Kim, 2023). By 1953, the Korean War came to an apparent stalemate around the 38th parallel (Kim, 2024). Eventually, the United Nations, North Korea and China signed the Armistice Agreement on July 27th, 1953, halting all offensive war efforts by delineating the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) which still stands today. Technically, since South Korea did not sign the agreement, the two Koreas are still considered to be at war 70 years later, unable to find resolution. Ever since, South and North Korea have increasingly developed into their own countries, identities, and societies.

The Resources: The North Korean Gender Landscape

The next three sections—"The Resources," "Handling Pieces of the Living," and "Reassemblage in the Present"—thoroughly examine the shift in North Korean women's gender roles during the 1994 famine. The first section, titled "The Resources," presents the foundation of North Korean cultural elements specific to constructing North Korea's gender landscape leading up to the famine of 1994. The next section, "Handling pieces of the Living," describes ways women interacted with components of their society during the famine to creatively construct pathways into a more livable reality. Lastly, the third section, "Reassemblage in the Present" outlines ways such adaptations of components during the famine led to tangible social change in the following generations.

Constructing North Korea's Gender Roles (1945-70s): Juche and Motherhood

Kim Il-Sung's rise to power in 1946 brought on mass reform in respect to governance as well as society. While Kim Il-Sung largely incorporated socialist ideals, he also strongly emphasized the importance of maintaining traditional Korean identity (Kim, 1973). More specifically, Kim Il-Sung stressed in his 1955 speech that while Marxism and Leninism had value to their ideologies, he warned that people should not "...swallow Marxism and Leninism raw" (Kim, 1973, p. 401). As a result, Kim Il-Sung created *Juche* (주체): the uniquely North Korean ideology that underlined the importance of North Korea's self-reliance as both a country and as people (Kim, 2023). In Kim Il-Sung's eyes, *Juche* was a means to revolutionize the people to achieve North Korea's independence and reach their goal of reunification with the South (Kim, 1973).

Beyond just self-reliance, *Juche* can also be described as a more personal concept of orienting one's "self-importance" or "self-significance" to give back towards the betterment of

the nation (Lankov, 2013). In order to do so, Kim Il-Sung asserted in his *Exposition of The Juche Idea* (1983) that Juche involves the driving force of *Chajusong* (자주성), or the capacity to creatively adapt and change in different contexts (Kim, 1983). By 1972, Kim Il-Sung officially incorporated Juche ideology into the constitution, marking the beginnings of *Suryong* (“Great Leader”; 수령) or “Kim Il-Sungism”—where cult-like ideology behind Kim Il-Sung’s leadership and hereditary succession of the government became the norm (W.Kim, 2014).

In addition to *Juche*, Kim Il-Sung also adapted original Marxist thought of the proletariat to encapsulate the inclusion of motherhood. Echoing socialist ideologies, Kim Il Sung believed in alleviating the “double burden” of motherhood—the stressful balance of work and domestic responsibilities—to equalize the playing field and create a unified proletariat, regardless of gender related expectations (Park, 1992b). Kim Il-Sung enacted various laws, like the Gender Equality Law and Labor Law of 1946, which aimed to bring women equal opportunity in the workforce by providing services such as statewide childcare, paid maternity leave, and food delivery services (Park, 1992b). Kim Il-Sung also launched campaigns such as the Ch’ollima Movement (천리마운동) (1958) and the Triple Revolution (1960) which worked to increase production by improving women’s participation in constructing the socialist nation (Park, 1992b). While these movements aimed to alleviate the “double burden” of motherhood, they simultaneously—and arguably contradictorily—promoted the ideal of the “Communist Mother.” This ideal envisioned mothers as the ultimate revolutionaries, essential both in public life through their work and in private life by raising the next generation of loyal North Korean children (Park, 1992b).

The notion of the Communist mother and woman is strengthened by classic literature, operas, and plays in North Korea such as, *Flower Girl* (꽃파는 처녀) (1972), *Sea of Blood*

(*해바라기*) (1971), and *The Immortal Woman Revolutionary* (1987). These works focus on the revolutionary woman in the context of the Japanese colonial period, illustrating the North Korean expectations of motherhood through a framework scholar Suzy Kim (2014) recognizes as the “mother and maidens” trope. The lead protagonists in these acclaimed literary pieces are either categorized as a mother, who takes on a role of selfless and protective militarism against colonial powers (i.e. in *Sea of Blood* where the protagonist mother militantly defends against colonial powers), while others are more so maidens, who embody femininity in their revolutionary actions (i.e. in *Flower Girl* where the protagonist sells flowers to secretly pass on messages for the revolution) (S.Kim, 2014). The conceptualization of mothers and maidens as both viable forms of revolutionaries creates a dual understanding of North Korean womanhood, encapsulating both a militarized identity as well as a feminine identity (S.Kim, 2014). The concept of the North Korean mother, as Suzy Kim (2014) argues, becomes a non-effeminized definition and therefore generalizable to men. For instance, Kim Il-Sung noted that North Korean party workers should emulate selfless motherhood when exercising their power over the people, coining the term “mother party” while Kim Jong-Il also acclaimed the title “Great Mother Kim Jong Il” (S.Kim, 2014). Motherhood became the symbolic “idealized bond” in North Korea, becoming a model for the citizens and the nation in carrying out socialist qualities of selflessness for the betterment of the collective, akin to a mother’s selfless ferocity for her children.

North Korea’s construction of motherhood and conceptions of women’s equality in the workforce, however, cannot be equated to Western feminist movements of women’s empowerment. Rather, the North Korean woman is tied to her identity as a part of the proletariat, not as a woman (Park, 1992b). The concept of gender equality as understood by Western feminism fundamentally violates socialist ideology. Western feminism challenges patriarchal

oppression and demands for women's social equality, thereby distinguishing women as a separate group from the working class. This distinction introduces a form of "false consciousness" that undercuts the core Marxist principle of a classless society (Park, 1992b).

However, regardless of North Korea's strides to create an all-equal proletariat across genders, the reality presents distinct gendered expectations for women. Both Kim Il-Sung's attempt to rid North Korean women of the "double burden" through state action (Ch'ollima and Triple Revolution) and his genderless conception of "motherhood" in state produced literature, still functionally pins women to the gendered expectation of selflessly caring for her children and domestic life (Jung & Dalton, 2006). State-run day care facilities and food delivery systems implemented to alleviate burdens from *women* indirectly assumes the innate responsibility for women to take responsibility for domestic labor. Additionally, by likening the ideological standard of selflessness for the state to "motherhood" indirectly strengthens and imbues the notion that it is ultimately the women's responsibility to nurture and be selfless. Afterall, Kim Il-Sung and the state could have utilized terminologies such as "selflessness" and "care" to encapsulate their message but instead chose to symbolically idealize motherhood—intrinsically tied to women—to communicate their state ideology. Further exemplifying the point that women did not escape gendered expectations of motherhood, women took the brunt of the blame if her child did not prove to be a "good socialist (Jung & Dalton, 2006). Underneath the guise of equality, North Korean women were still subjugated and suffered immense pressures of the patriarchy.

Public Distribution System (PDS) and Gender Roles in the 1980s

The existence of patriarchal gender roles in North Korea only became more visible in the 1980s, a period of economic decline and instability. Although the government pushed for

equality in job opportunities, women were primarily employed in “light” labor jobs (70% of light labor workers were women in the 1980s) which yielded fewer returns than their male counterparts—this gap was especially pronounced due to the fact that North Korea prioritized the production of “heavy” industrial products for military development (Jung & Dalton, 2006). In the 1950s-1980s, the “heavy” labor industry was dominated by men and received more for their daily food ration under the Public Distribution System (PDS): 900g, as opposed to the regular daily ration of 700g (Lankov, et al., 2013; as depicted in the table below). As the economy slumped, women began to find less value in work and education, sustaining primarily on their respective husband’s work and rations (Jung & Dalton, 2006).

Table 1. Ration Amounts by Grade in the 1980s (Chang & Jeong, 2015)

Grade	Ration Amount	Recipients
1	900g	Workers in the hazardous and heavy industries (primarily male workers)
2	800g	Miners, mine workers, heavy equipment operators (primarily male workers)
3	700g	Ordinary workers (Primarily female workers)
4	600g	College students, senior men of merit with social security, patients
5	500g	Middle school students
6	400g	Primary school students
7	300g	Senior men on social security , kindergarten students, full-time housewives
8	200g	Toddlers between 1-4 years of age, prisoners

9	100g	Infants under the age of 1
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*The author of this thesis bolded when rations were contingent on gender

Further intensifying women's reliance on men, Kim Il-Sung enacted the August 3rd People's Consumer Goods Production Movement in 1984 (commonly referred to as 8.3 Decision) establishing new criteria to be exempt from North Korea's mandatory work requirement (Lankov, et al., 2013). Specifically, the August 3rd law allowed married women to be exempt from the workforce in order to become a full-time housewife to fulfill their motherly duties (Chang & Jeong, 2015; Lankov, et al., 2013). As evident in *Table 1*, full time housewives were even compensated with 300g of rations. Consequently, in the 1980s, 60-70% of women left the workplace and returned to the household where a woman's patriarchal role solidified (Jung & Dalton, 2006). This large exodus of women from the workplace and return to domestic life reflected a return to more neo-Confucian family structures. The value of bearing a son became increasingly more important for families as a son was viewed as someone who could both continue the family lineage and provide later support to his parents once he began working (Jung and Dalton, 2006). As a result, husbands could legally request a divorce in the case that women did not bear a son—closely reflecting Joseon Dynasty's *chilgo chiak* or seven evils (Jung and Dalton, 2006; Park, 1992a).

Beyond the PDS: Additional Food Sources

In addition to food received by the PDS system, many farmers also individually raised livestock and grew produce on small private plots known as "kitchen gardens"—government-permitted plots of around 3.306 square meters (Chang & Jeong, 2015). Commonly, farmers would sell their kitchen garden at small scale farmers' markets (Chang & Jeong, 2015). While some government officials contested these farmers markets to be a capitalistic threat, Kim Il

Sung declared that just “sell[ing] a few chickens expensively... will not make them capitalists... There is nothing wrong with such production ... rather, it can be good” (Chang & Jeong, 2015, pg. 75). Arguably, the existence of markets still fit within the *Juche* doctrine, promoting creative pathways to enhance the rural community. Though, in the 1980s, markets were also only localized to rural areas and were strictly regulated, only allowed to open once every ten days (Chang & Jeong, 2015).

The Arduous March: North Korean Famine

In December 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, causing a catastrophic ripple effect on the North Korean economy. Despite Kim Il-Sung's claim that North Korea acted as a self-reliant country, the harsh reality was that North Korea heavily depended on aid from the USSR (Jung & Dalton, 2006). Specifically, North Korea largely relied on the Soviet Union's “friendship prices” for petroleum which abruptly halted in the Soviet Union's demise (Seth, 2011). The lack of petroleum had a cascading effect on North Korea's agriculture as essential machinery, like tractors and production of fertilizer, could not function without oil (Seth, 2011). As a result, many crops were unsustainably planted and vulnerable to pests (Seth, 2011). In addition, coupled with economic instability, North Korea faced extreme bouts of flooding and droughts, eroding the already weakened soil and further impacting crop production (Jung & Dalton, 2006). Consequently, from 1991-1996, the North Korean economy contracted by 30%, resulting in a famine from 1994-1998 which North Korea refers to as “The Arduous March” (Jung & Dalton, 2006). 2 million people, around 5% of North Korea's population, died due to famine related causes and more than 150,000 – 195,000 North Koreans fled in search of food and remittances for their families across the border, over half being women (Mucio, 2005; Seth, 2011; Lankov, 2013).

Without aid from the Communist Bloc, North Korea suffered and, as a socialist state, could no longer supply citizens with the promised food and income needed for survival. At the peak of the famine in 1997, North Korea's food rationing system, the PDS, ceased in operations (Jung & Dalton, 2006). Therefore, maintaining one's basic survival grew central to the everyday lives of North Koreans. To do so, citizens grappled with existing systems and repurposed them into livable realities (Chang & Jeong, 2015). Employment no longer yielded any form of return, meaning men's disproportionately higher returns from work that was pronounced in the 1980s diminished almost completely during the famine (Jung & Dalton, 2006). Furthermore, due to the intense contraction of the economy, many workplaces and factories were left dysfunctional, and workers who attended work had nothing to produce (Lankov, et al., 2013). Worse yet, the North Korean state continued to enforce strict socialist work laws regardless of the unproductive conditions in the workplace (Lankov, et al., 2013). In other words, those who were not exempt from the 1984 August 3rd decision were mandated to participate in "useless" jobs (Jung & Dalton, 2006).

In the face of Kim Il Sung's death in 1994, famine, and immense economic failure, a once tightly controlled society grew frayed and unraveled. Equally falling victim to the famine, enforcement officers became lackadaisical in their punishments and grew susceptible to bribes from citizens (Chang & Jeong, 2015). In addition, border patrol was less enforced, and North Korea's sino-Korean border grew porous (Lankov, 2013). In effect, North Korea's milieu provided a novel arena where creative means of survival blossomed.

Handling Pieces of the Living: North Korean Women and Creative Markets

Starvation, being one of the leading causes of death at the time of the famine, placed an excruciating amount of burden upon households (Seth, 2011). As referenced in the previous section, North Korean women were perceived as the primary caretakers for household labor and family care—including the provision of food (Park, 1992a). At the same time, North Korean women were also visualized as militant mothers, one who must selflessly protect and provide for others (Kim, 2014). Therefore, in the face of North Korea's economic collapse where the state could no longer sustain their social welfare programs, women automatically harbored the undue burden of providing for her family.

While most men struggled to make ends meet in their unfruitful state jobs, the August 3rd decision unintentionally positioned women in a mobile position. With their newfound mobility, women began engaging with the black market and sex work to make up for the support their husbands could no longer provide, becoming the primary breadwinners in their families (Lankov, et al., 2013). As scholars Lankov and colleagues (2013) put it, “men are left behind and capitalism is left to women” (p. 63). The unique ways in which women utilized their mobility from the 8.3 Contribution Decision during the famine of 1994 will be the primary focus of the following section.

Jangmadang: Operating in Markets

With a desperate demand for resources, the once small-scale farmers markets grew pervasive across the country and developed into common practice (Chang & Jeong, 2015). Rather than being restricted to rural areas, many markets emerged in urban settings, especially places lining the border between China and North Korea (Lankov, 2013). Connections with Chinese-Korean relatives—once punishable under North Korean law—became highly valued,

offering access to capital, business advice, and opportunities to become traders by receiving illegal imports for sale in markets (Lankov, 2013). For instance, a North Korean woman who was in communication with relatives in Northern China discovered the lucrative practice of reselling Chinese goods (Lankov, 2013). Specifically, the woman received smuggled dried fish from her Northern Chinese relatives and later resold the good in markets (Lankov, 2013). Her earnings from the market far surpassed her annual salary as a schoolteacher (Lankov, 2013).

In addition to selling smuggled goods from China, people also began farming on their own kitchen gardens and selling their harvest in nearby markets. Essential commodities such as rice, vegetables, cooking oil, sugar, and seasoning were sold at markets, providing a food source and work for the starving population (Chang & Jeong, 2015). These markets, intermixed with privately produced goods and smuggled goods from China, formed a robust second economy and came to be known as *Jangmadang*.

North Korea's second economy was particularly unique as around 75% of Jangmadang market vendors were women—stereotypically *Ajummas* (아줌마), or middle-aged married women (Lankov, et al., 2013). While scholars in North Korean studies assert that the rapid shift to markets occurred due to the decentralization of the state and shift to individualism, this story undercuts the agency of the actor (Chang & Jeong, 2015). While it may superficially seem that North Korea was experiencing a shift to individualism, I argue that actor's shift to capitalist markets was primarily rooted in North Korean elements of society: North Korean motherhood ideologies and Confucianism.

Communist Motherhood and Creative Solutions

Specifically, North Korean mothers continued to harbor the pressures of embodying the “communist mother,” required to shoulder the “double burden” of maintaining the home as well

as remaining a good worker. With little to no food available through the PDS system, working mothers of households were left with unfulfilled roles and starving families. However, the August 3rd People's Consumer Goods Production Movement in 1984, freed women from the work requirement and granted them the ability to operate in markets and other capitalistic means for the sake of their survival (Chang & Jeong, 2015).

If anything, North Korean mothers' participation in markets fulfills the tenets of Kim Il-Sung's ideology of *Juche*. As delineated by Kim Il-Sung, one of *Juche* ideology's primary components relies on the concept of "*chajusong* (차주송)," or the "creative method" (Kim Il Sung). *Chajusong* urges North Koreans to uphold *Juche* by "... solv[ing] all problems in conformity with the changes and development in the reality and the specific conditions of the country" (Kim, 1983). In other words, *Chajusong* elicits actors to operate creatively for the sake of the survival of the country. While Kim Il-Sung did not assert these ideas be applied via black markets, famine struck North Korean women re-envisioned central ideas of *Chajusong* to apply to the "specific conditions of the country."

Additionally, North Korean women also did not stray far from Kim Il-Sung's depiction of motherhood— acting selflessly for the sake of others. While on the surface, women were granted more economic freedom than their male counterparts during the famine, women continuously bore the "double torture" expected of communist mothers by performing both housework duties and work during a period of critical distress and need (Chang & Jeong, 2015, pg. 92). Despite the difficulties of juggling work and household care, mothers trudged forward, using any possible means to promote the survival of not only themselves, but their family.

Women were not only able to engage as vendors in *Jangmadang*, but some also operated on a larger scale, running gray market restaurants and at home "factories." For instance, a

defector from North Korea shared her experience running a tobacco and cigarette workshop. After getting married, the defector immediately quit her job under the 1984 8.3 work exemption to start her own business (Lankov, et al., 2013). Coupled with an increase in kitchen garden production, idle factories filled with unused, raw materials, and the porous Sino-Korean border, the defector began producing her own cigarettes (Lankov, et al., 2013). The defector purchased around 20% of her cigarette paper supply stolen from useless factories, most of her tobacco from kitchen garden farmers, and the rest of her materials from illegal Chinese imported goods (Lankov, et al., 2013). Additionally, due to the desperate demand for employment with returns, the defector was able to hire five teenaged girls to assist with labor and production (Lankov, et al., 2013).

In total, the defector's monthly income stood around 600-700 USD per month starkly contrasting the average *family* income of \$25-35 USD (Lankov, et al., 2013). A woman's income, therefore, far exceeded her husband's salary, and eventually, women's market work became a primary and common component to a family's survival. Those who, like the cigarette producing defector, found success in the second economy were labeled as the "new rich" (Lankov, et al., 2013). As a North Korean observer put it, "Those who could not trade are long dead, and we are only left with survivors..." (Lankov, 2013). By utilizing pre-existing elements of North Korean society, North Korean women creatively and adaptively leveraged the system to promote their survival.

Confucianism and Fake Marriages

Considering the 8.3 work exemption law granted a convenient exit from the stringent work requirement, marriage grew increasingly central to allowing women to work and therefore survive. The general sentiment of women at the time of the Arduous March reflected that women

needed to be married and that men were essential (Park, 2021). One defector from the famine stated, “You absolutely have to get married. You can't live alone. Why? Because there are many difficult things. ... A woman can't solve problems on her own.” [무조건 결혼을 해야 돼. 혼자서는 살 수가 없어. 왜, 힘든 일이 많아. ... 여자 혼자 힘으로는 뭘 할 해결을 못해.] (p. 61, Park, 2021, [translated using a machine translation tool]). While the defector was primarily alluding to men's aid in completing the demanding physical labor involved in everyday survival, the quote still illustrates Arduous March North Korea as heavily patriarchal and marriage centric.

In the context of the famine, marriage continued to be essential in promoting the survival of women and, although not admitted at the time, men. Without marriage, circumventing work requirements and participating in black markets was far more difficult. Being absent from work without an exemption resulted in hefty fines, “labor reeducation” and imprisonment (Lankov, 2013). To evade such barriers and utilize the 8.3 statute to their advantage, some women engaged in “fake marriages” (Lankov, et al., 2013). In fake marriages, women came to agreement with a man under the pretense of wanting to be exempt from the workforce to work in the black market (Lankov, et al., 2013). Particularly, women would either bribe unmarried Chinese merchants or North Korean soldiers to become their husbands (Lankov, et al., 2013). In this instance, Confucian norms surrounding marriage was turned on its head, where women played into the North Korean and Confucian values of marriage, but in a way that operated around social barriers. In other words, a woman involved in a fake marriage leaned into her embodiment of a Confucian “good wife” committed to “housework” and upheld the Confucian importance of marriage to find an entry into the black market.

Seeking Survival in Sex Work

Another route of survival occurred across borders into China. In the peak of the famine in 1997, over 50,000 North Koreans fled across the Sino Korean border in hopes for another means of survival. Of those that fled, around 70% of the defectors were women (Kim, et al., 2009). This gender distribution can be largely attributed to two factors: 1. The pressures of North Korean motherhood “pushed” women out of the country to find alternative means for survival, and 2. The work available in China “pulled” North Korean women out as the jobs available were highly feminized (Mucio, 2005). A 1999 study listed that the top three primary motives of North Korean women defectors was as follows: “Hunger and survival” (81.7%), “To make more money in China” (75.2%), and “to support the family in North Korea” (50.5%) (Lim, 2005).

North Korean defectors illegal economic immigration status in China qualified North Koreans for immediate deportation (Charny, 2004). Therefore, North Korean defectors were relegated to under-the-table employment in China. Unreported and less visible jobs included positions such as housekeeping, working at restaurants, and commonly, sex work— all jobs in which are feminized (Charny, 2004). Menial jobs traditionally masculinized such as construction, however, were highly visible to the state and thereby dangerous for North Korean male defectors (Kook, 2018). Therefore, invisibility of work became a necessity as being found by the Chinese government resulted in being sent back to North Korea where they risked severe physical, monetary and social punishment (Kook, 2018).

With more access to jobs, women grew to be the largest demographic defecting from North Korea in the 1990s (Kim, et al., 2009). That said, due to women’s mass exodus out of North Korea, many individuals in China capitalized off the opportunity to develop a robust sex trade (Kim, et al., 2009). In fact, of the women that escaped during the famine, 80-90% of

women were trafficked and sold into the sex trade or forced marriages (Kim, et al., 2009). In North Korean women's escape across the border, many were either smuggled once they entered China or swindled by North Koreans that were already a part of the sex trade (sometimes, family members) and deceptively promised a job and security in China (Kim, et al., 2009). Due to North Korean women's vulnerability in their migration to a new country, Chinese-Koreans leveraged their ability to speak Korean and tricked women into being trafficked (Kim, et al., 2009).

Once trafficked, women became subject to harsh realities of the sex trade. Forced into the business of prostitution, women and girls as young as the age of 13 suffered egregious abuse by their traffickers and clients (Kim, et al., 2009). In addition, China's imbalance in sex ratio of 114.06 males per 100 females in 1993 left many Chinese men without wives, increasing the demand for forced marriages (Jiang et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2009). In forced marriages, the "husband" is entitled to demand anything he wants from his "wife," often involving physical and sexual abuse (Mucio, 2005). To prevent the women from escaping, the husband would entrap his "wife" in the house (Mucio, 2005). However, while North Korean women evidently faced debilitating and severe human rights violations within forced marriages, defectors have reported that the abusive outcomes paled in comparison to the starvation and likely death they would have experienced in North Korea (Choi 2014; Kook 2018).

From Kook's (2018) analysis of her interviews with defectors, she posits that while a significant amount of North Korean women falls subject to violent outcomes of human trafficking in China, they are not all helpless victims in the process of their trafficking. North Korean women recognized and were aware of the common outcomes of their migration to China, and with this knowledge, still actively decided to be smuggled across the border (Kook, 2016). In fact, 80% of those who initially escaped forced marriages returned to forced marriages (Kook.

2018). From this perspective, women can be understood as actors with agency who consciously exercise their sexualized feminine body as a method to escape the deadly consequences of starvation in North Korea (Jung & Dalton, 2006). Women can locate small opportunities of agency to choose the lesser evil between forced marriages and famine. Uniquely, women, unlike their male counterparts, are able further repurpose their oppressed femininity to open different avenues. Albeit the options that women are presented are not in any sense “good,” but observing way actors adapt around their confines is salient.

Sex Work in North Korea

Women also engaged in sex work *within* North Korea. While North Korea had formally abolished sex work in 1950, the famine brought on a reemergence of sex work as women made money by providing her sexual services to male clients who were either a part of the “new rich” or government officials (Lankov, 2008). Sex work grew pervasive as it became a means of survival within North Korea among both married and un-married women (Lim, 2005). Married women involved in sex work fascinatingly superseded the strict, Confucian norms of loyalty to one’s husband. In fact, the punishment for sex work was extreme (execution by firing squad) up until the peak of the famine in 1998, but women who were caught engaging in sex work for the sake of her family were punished less severely than her unmarried counterparts (Lim, 2005). Therefore, married women were guarded by the properties of “the communist mother,” gaining more liberty to act with less repercussions in financial markets, including sex work, than unmarried women.

Due to the widespread presence of markets, women would operate in *Jangmadang* where they targeted rich merchants, travelers, and businessmen as their primary clientele (Lim, 2005). Often, women would offer their home as “overnight inns” where they invited their clients to

spend a night (Lim, 2005). In some instances, women would also steal from their rich customers as a means to make more money (Lim, 2005). Jangmadang was therefore a layered space where women could actively reconfigure oppressive systems into a profitable means of survival.

Reassemblage in the Present: Jangmadang Generation

To present, *Jangmadang* remains a well-established way of life in North Korea (Chang & Jeong, 2015). In fact, even the government, in some respects, recognizes the significance of markets in North Korea and has somewhat enforced the continued existence of markets (Chang & Jeong, 2015). Due to North Korean people's reliance on markets throughout the famine, *Jangmadang* resisted the government's multiple attempts at dismantling operations (Lankov, 2013). During the famine, the government tried to close *Jangmadang*, but ultimately failed as the low-level officials who would typically enforce such efforts also relied on the existence of markets (Lankov, 2013). By 2002, the state stopped fighting the existence of markets and instead integrated *Jangmadang* more officially within governmental operations and laws (Lankov, 2013). 7.1 measures of 2002 established state recognized "general markets" and took control over price and wage regulations (Lankov, 2013). In doing so, consumer prices increased by 25 times and wages raised by 18 times (Lankov, 2013). State run factories and businesses could also legally utilize products from the markets and provide bonuses to employees usable in markets as incentives (Lankov, 2013).

However, by 2005, the state enacted legislation to revive the PDS system, but ultimately failed (Lankov, 2013). Attempting further efforts to deter and dismantle markets, the government banned able-bodied men from operating in markets, reemphasizing and reflecting the 8.3 legislation of 1984 (Lankov, 2013). Though, if men were considered dependent on their wife and not the primary breadwinners of their household, they were still permitted to work in markets (Lankov, 2013). This mandate seemingly tried to restore a lost sense of patriarchy in terms of economic superiority of women. Continuing into 2007, women under the age of 50 were restricted to work in markets (Chang & Jeong, 2015). Although younger women circumvented

these new restrictions by working with older female relatives to claim exemption from the workforce for the purpose of elderly care (Lankov, 2013). Therefore, like fake marriages during the famine, women utilized elements of North Korean ideology—in this case, Confucian emphasis of filial piety—to continue her operation in markets. Women also fought back against the 2007 restrictions by organizing riots in Chongjin in 2008 (Lankov, 2013). Ultimately, markets became so pervasive and central to the everyday life of North Koreans, the state was unable to effectively enforce measures to shut down such practices.

Women continue to dominate operations in the second economy (Cho, et al., 2020). Fascinatingly, North Korean defectors' accounts reveal that women's continued dominance in markets and economic superiority is leading to tangible change in North Korean gender dynamics. After a decade of developing a robust, capitalistic second-economy, North Korean defectors a part of the *Jangmadang* generation (those who were born around the 1990s) present perspectives indicating shifting perspectives. One defector notes:

“Looking at our generation, nobody wants to work at an office. We just want to go out to the society and sell stuff and make money. They don't even think about getting married. Life is hard. My friends who got married and had children...they used to be really pretty, but they lose so much weight after getting married. Our parents say, “hey, if you are going to live that hard after getting married, you'd be better off living alone, run your business, and live off what you make...” (p. 51 - 52 (Cho, et al., 2020)

As women's position in the second economy persisted, North Korean men continued to be pushed to the sidelines. With a dysfunctional PDS system, men's economic superiority no longer remained systematically enforced, and the patriarchy faltered. As the participation in the market became normative, a woman's participation in the market no longer remained contingent on her marital status. Consequently, men no longer had much utility in both the realms of marriage and

higher wages. Women, therefore, are now “better off living alone, run[ning their] business” (Cho, et al., 2020). A defector poignantly describes:

"Defector C: Things have become similar to South Korea. Women's authority has increased a bit. It's like that economically and socially, so as the younger generation comes forward, women are rebelling a lot against men. Even if they don't do it, there are cases where they don't even officially get divorced, but still say 'don't live like that' and end up not living together... That's how it was when I was there. *'I can live without a father, but I can't live without a mother.'*"

Interviewer: "Why don't women get married?"

"Because there's nothing good about it. There's nothing good about getting married... *(Business) is not something men should do. Business is something women do.* But now, you can't live without the marketplace (jangmadang). So, women are the ones supporting men." (Park, 2021, [translated using a machine translation tool]).

Original Passage:

다: 한국이랑 비슷해졌어요. 여자들의 권위가 좀 올라갔어요. 경제적인 것도 그렇고 사회적으로도 그러니까 좀 젊은 층으로 가게 되면서 여자들 이 남자들한테 되게 많이 반항하고 안 했을 때 거기는 딱히 이혼도 (서류상) 잘 안 지워도 그렇게 하면 살지 마 이렇게 하고 안 사는 경우에도 많고 ... 제가 있을 때는 그랬어요. “아빠 없이는 살아도 엄마 없이는 못 살아.” (탈북 여성 다)

[조사자 : 여자들이 왜 결혼 안 해?]

다: 좋은 게 없으니까. 결혼해서 좋은 게 없으니까. ... (장사는) 남자가 할 일이 아니라고 생각합니다. 장사는 여자가 하는 일. 근데 지금은 장마당 아니면 살 수가 없으니까. 그래서 여자들이 남자들을 먹여 살리는 구조거든요. (박, 2021)

Actors' creative adaptations to the elements of North Korean society during the famine of 1994 unraveled the fabric of society, and with the same thread, rewove North Korea's milieu to a new social reality. Evident from quotes from *Jangmadang* generation defectors, North Korean women's gender roles and expectations continued to develop and adjust to the existence of

markets. While the components of the double burden of motherhood and patriarchal expectations certainly persist, they have evolved in a way that ultimately uplifts women in new and unexpected ways.

The Resources: The South Korean Gender Landscape

Mirroring the previous three sections, the next three sections mimic an identical arc of the North Korean case study, only this time covering South Korea's gender dynamics and women's actions that circumvent patriarchal pressures in the 21st century. To start, however, the following section covers South Korea's construction of gender roles starting from post-Korean war and into the 21st century. This history and cultural context are crucial as it uncovers the emerging Confucian-capitalistic culture and ways the two cultural ideologies collide, pronouncing the subjugation of South Korean women.

Constructing South Korean Gender: 1950s - 1970s

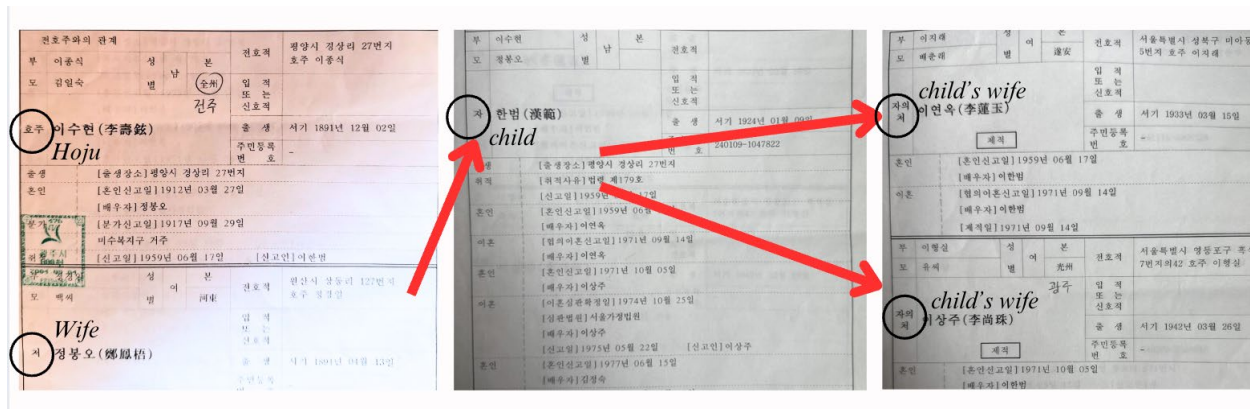
Like North Korea, South Korea was faced with the difficult task of reconstructing their society post-Korean war. Backed by capitalist US, South Korea slowly began rebuilding the economy and society, healing from both Japanese Colonial period (1910- 1945) and damages from the Korean war (1950-53) (Jung, 2024). The US appointed the first South Korean president, Syngman Rhee, into office in 1948— a highly controversial president who utilized practices often questioned by the public (In, 2001). Under Rhee's presidency (1948-60), the Korean economy slumped, and the nation remained underdeveloped (Jung, 2024). Throughout the 1950s-60s, most South Koreans lived through immense economic hardship and struggled to survive (Jung, 2024). Additionally, South Korea carried lingering fears of their nearby communist neighbors, frightened by the prospects of another North Korean attempt at infiltrating South Korea (Jung, 2024).

Within South Korea's politicized environment, many feminist movements began to dissolve in the wake of the 1950s. Given that feminist movements primarily functioned as independence movements during the Japanese colonial period and into the Korean war, they

quickly became entangled in the controversy surrounding Rhee's presidency (Jung, 2024). Due to starkly different perspectives on politics, feminist groups grew divided and lost momentum (Jung, 2024). Furthermore, with South Korean society consumed in the "red scare," feminist movements fell out of the spotlight (Jung, 2024).

Additionally, President Rhee established South Korea's Civil Code in 1958, outlining a similar *hoju-je* system as implemented in the Japanese colonial period (Moon & Kim Choe, 2020). In the 1958 Civil Code, the parental rights to a child only fell under the father's control and the mother held no legal custody (Moon & Kim Choe, 2020). The *Hoju-je* was patrilineal, and women were required to "abandon" her own family and transfer to her husband's register once married (Jung, 2024). In other words, the woman was always attached to male ownership. The child also, by law, was required to take the father's last name, increasing the cultural value of men as the primary preservers of family lineage and continuing to sideline women (Moon & Kim Choe, 2020). The *Hoju-je's* patrilineal nature eventually translated to an artificially high sex-ratio of 113 men to 100 women in 1990 (Kim, 2007). In fact, in 1997 it was reported that one in every twelve female fetuses were aborted due to their revealed sex (Kim, 2007). Coupled with South Korea's adoption of existing Confucian-backed patriarchal systems and lack of feminist movements, women's roles were constructed in an extremely traditional sense and tied to her position as a domestic caretaker (Park, 1992a).

Figure 2. Example of a Hoju exemplifying patrilineal structure



Miracle on the Han River: 1960s

In 1962, military leader Park Chung Hee led a coup and usurped control of the government (Teekah, 2025). Tired of slow economic progress, Park instated martial law, forming the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction (1963-1979) (Teekah, 2025). As a part of his efforts to stimulate the South Korean economy, Park Chung Hee outlawed forms of civic action and established firm economic reforms to boost the economy (Teekah, 2025). Some economic reforms included the expansion of South Korea's manufacturing branch to increase South Korea's export economy (Teekah, 2025). Additionally, Park Chung-Hee utilized indoctrinating tactics to spur national support for his movement toward rapid development (Kim, 2005). Entrenched with Confucian and nationalist ideology, the government asserted that the South Korean nation should be visualized as entire family unit led under the "head" of the family, Park Chung-hee himself (Kim, 2005). By likening the country to a family, it demanded that the citizens exemplify *chung* (정) the Confucian ideal of loyalty toward the family (Kim, 2005). Therefore, operating under *chung* it was expected for citizens to work tirelessly for the sake of the nation, even if that meant to needing to endure suffering (Kim, 2005). This rhetoric justified forms of extremely cheap labor and poor work environments which grew central to boosting

South Korean economy (Jung, 2024). Those most exploited most for cheap labor, however, were South Korean women (Jung, 2024).

Under Park Chung-Hee's rule, women made up 80% of factory workers in the 1970s-80s where 50% of those women were teenagers (Jung, 2024). Factory workers suffered extensive work hours (~20 hours/day), and women experienced physical abuse from their supervisors and male coworkers (Jung, 2024). Many young factory women worked selflessly to support their family, and oftentimes, fund their brothers (if any) in their educational endeavors (Jung, 2024). Furthermore, women's labor was less valued, earning far less than her male counterparts (Jung, 2024). Young factory women were also expected to "retire" from their jobs once they were of age (20s) to get married and return to the household to become housewives (Jung, 2024). The South Korean woman was therefore visualized as both a viable worker and as an expected housewife. However, the South Korean woman never embodied simultaneous identities as a worker and housewife, rather she was only seen as a worker up until her expected time to become a mother. Factory employers' assertion of their expectations over women's retirement dictated the sense that a woman must give up all forms of work and employment to completely fulfill her expected domestic role. Therefore, it seems that capitalist and Confucian demands of women are inherently at odds with one another, unable to fulfill both completely when in coexistence.

Under such problematic work conditions, factory women protested their mistreatment and low wages (Jung, 2024). Though, under Park Chung Hee's strict administration, their efforts were met with police retaliation in which killed a 21-year-old striking worker (Jung, 2024). This unjustified killing sparked national outrage toward Park's administration and ultimately fueled

further national pushback—such as the Gwangju Uprising in 1980—against Park’s rule (Jung, 2024).

While factory women’s protest certainly made a national impact, Park Chung-Hee ultimately bolstered patriarchal structures. Park emphasized the importance of South Korea’s military power, considering the proximity of North Korea, and worked to strengthen South Korea’s military presence (Jung, 2024). Park Chung Hee continued the 2-year military requirement established in 1948, requiring all able-bodied men to serve in the military (Artaiz, 2024). Cementing the military requirement into South Korean norms, a man’s service in the military grew became associated with defining a “real man” (Jung, 2024). Due to societal implications and earned respect of completing one’s military service, militaristic practices infiltrated everyday life and intrapersonal relationships (Jung, 2024). Those who did not complete military service—primarily women—lacked respect and experienced discrimination (Jung, 2024). Additionally, hierarchical relationships in the workplace, schools, and relationships grew interlaced with militaristic notions of inflicting violence upon the subordinate (Jung, 2024). The normalization of military practice in everyday life further imbued an oppressive relationship between men and women which trickled beyond Park Chung-Hee’s rule.

South Korea and Anti-Feminism in the 1980s

Following Park Chung-Hee’s assassination in 1979, many South Koreans yearned for the return of traditional Korean thought (Kim, 1996). Tired of the import of Western ideas, South Korean anti-Americanism and neo-nationalism began to rise in the late 1970s and into the 80s (Kim, 1996). Neo-nationalists’ viewed the US and Western influence as a threat to South Korea’s traditional and Confucian origins, leading to their desire to reclaim a sense of national identity (Kim, 1996). Since feminism in late 1970s South Korea stemmed from Western ideas

that critically inspected capitalism as a perpetrator of the patriarchy, Korean nationalists also associated feminism to be a threat to the South Korean identity (Kim, 1996).

Observing the clash in feminist and nationalist ideology, some feminist groups worked to adapt their movements to utilize a more nationalist framework. Feminist groups promoted the women's equality movement as an effective means to bolster South Korean democracy and economic growth (Kim & Lee, 2022). Specifically, they argued that by granting women equal access to education, a woman could therefore become more educated mothers, who in turn could better support and enhance their children's educational success (Kim & Lee, 2022). Similarly, pushing to dismantle the patriarchal *Hoju-je* system, South Korean feminists argued in a neo-nationalist fashion that the patrilineal system prevented South Korea from attaining the fully democratic and economically sufficient nation Koreans were striving for (Kim, 2007). Particularly, feminists underlined that the male preference in infants would aggravate issues of overpopulation—an economic hinderance—as families continued having children until they birthed a son (Kim, 2007). In addition, feminists posited that the *hoju-je* fundamentally prevented the ability for the South Korean democracy to flourish as the essential components, freedom and equality, were inequitably withheld by the family head (Kim, 2007). By inserting feminism under the nationalist and Confucian political bent of the 80s, feminist movements were able to urge equal opportunities for women. Though, it should be noted that South Korean feminists' nationalist adaptation to the women's equality movement still enforced the idea that women are tied to the household—similar to the way North Korean policies uphold the idea of women having a “double burden” of outside work and expected domestic labor.

21st Century South Korean Expectations of Womanhood

By the early 2000s, there were some notable strides in attempts to attain gender equality. For instance, the *hoju* Civil Code was deemed unconstitutional in 2005 by the Constitutional Court of Korea for its discriminatory implications based on gender and finally abolished in 2008 (Moon & Kim Choe, 2020). Even so, in 21st century South Korea, women's gender roles and inequality remain pronounced in society. South Korean women are expected to be the primary caretakers of domestic responsibilities—including care for her husband, her husband's in-laws, and her children (Kim, 2022). This is often referred to as the “marriage package” (Kim, 2022). Men are not expected to partake in household chores as they perceive their work in the workplace to be their primary contribution to the family, warranting that they rest when they return home while their wife maintains the household (Kim, 2022). A recent study reveals that men only spend around 49 minutes of housework while women spend around 215 minutes per day (Jung, 2024). Furthermore, this disparity does not alter significantly, even if the woman is the breadwinner of the household (Jung, 2024). These structures closely mirror those enforced in the Joseon Dynasty, explicitly viewing women as domestic caretakers and men as the public facing providers.

Additionally, mothers are expected to be the underpinning of their children's educational journey and success (Yang, 2011). Driven by Confucian values of education coupled with the promise of education being the key to upward mobility in a capitalist economy, South Korea developed an intensely competitive academic culture—often referred to as “education fever” (교육 열풍) (Yang, 2011). Mothers are expected to act as “education managers,” finding their children educational opportunities and making all necessary sacrifices to support their child through schooling (Yang, 2011). This includes enrolling children in private academies (학원)

and additional private lessons after a regular day of schooling—all of which a mother is expected to facilitate, whether that would be through transporting her child to such activities or staying up late to support the child’s studies (Yang, 2011). For example, some highly accredited private academies have extremely selective capacity where some parents wait full days in line from dawn to dusk to register their children (Kwon, 2025). These highly demanding time commitments to a child’s education equates to an all-day job for many mothers and further pushes women into the household and out of the workforce (Yang, 2011).

State level actions also further encapsulate the pressures of motherhood. For instance, in 2009, Shin Saimdang, an artist and writer of the Joseon Dynasty, was selected as the first woman to be pictured on a banknote, not only for her successes, but also for her depiction of being a “perfect wife and mother” (Kim, 2022). Local governments also distribute honorary awards to women they deem as “exemplary”—those who dedicate their lives for caring for their in-laws—called the “filial daughter-in-law” award (Jung, 2024). There is no such equivalent for son-in-laws (Jung, 2024) This award highlights deeply Confucian-based values where women are assigned to tending to familial care and exemplifying filial piety. Furthermore, South Korea’s extinction level birth rates (0.78 births per woman as of 2022) pressure women to give birth and visualize women as objectifiable means of reproduction (Jung, 2024). In 2016, the Korean government released an online “birth map” representing the population density of fertile women across the nation’s districts (Jung, 2024). South Korean women grew outraged, arguing the map portrayed women as livestock in need to be impregnated (Jung, 2024). Due to the public uproar, the South Korean government removed the map from their website (Jung, 2024). Despite the removal, it is evident through their policies that the state continues to uphold the systemic

expectations that women are tied to the home, expected to birth for the sake of the nation, and intrinsically tied to the responsibilities of motherhood.

South Korean Women in the Workforce

On top of domestic expectations, women pre-marriage also must compete to find a place in a highly patriarchal workforce. Despite South Korea's anti-discriminatory efforts, such as the Equal Employment act of 1984 and the Ministry of Gender Equality founded in 2001, women continue to experience systematically unequal opportunities and barriers into and in the workplace (Jung, 2024). Additionally, South Korea ranks last among the 38 OECD countries in gender pay equality, with a striking 30% wage gap between men and women (Jung, 2024). Furthermore, large corporations have been exposed for altering their recruitment scoring systems to systematically grant less points for women and more points for men, even if women are at their baseline more qualified (Jung, 2024). Additionally, a survey of 2,000 South Korean women found that over half have been asked gender-biased questions during interviews—largely questioning whether the women have or planned to give birth or if she was married (Jung, 2024).

Even if women overcome barriers to receiving employment, women are met with an “iron ceiling,” often unable to receive promotions and upward mobility in the workplace (Jung, 2024). As of 2017, in the top 500 South Korean corporations, only 2.7% of women held executive positions (Jung, 2024). A factor that may contribute to women attaining fewer promotions is many women's inability to participate fully in “Confucian capitalism,” or the idea that the workplace becomes a sort of functional “family” unit (Kim, 1998). For instance, a common practice known as *hwe-shik* (회식) or “after work dinner” where coworkers collect as a group, eat and drink together to cultivate a sense of community (Kim, 1998). While hwe-shiks are not explicitly required, many employers view their employee's attendance as a sign of their

commitment to the company and a way to foster more of a collective among coworkers (Kim, 1998). A *hwe-shik* often will last until late, around 10 or 11pm, which restricts women, who are expected to tend to housework or children, from participating fully in the business culture (Kim, 1998). While there is no existing empirical data to suggest a woman's inability to fully participate in *hwe-shik* culture hinders a woman's ability to gain upward mobility in the workforce, her expectations to return to home can block crucial opportunities for forming connections with her colleagues (Kim, 1998).

If a woman chooses to have a child, while maternity leave is technically an option, 60% of women have reported being bullied and pressured by HR and managers to quit (Jung, 2024). A woman who chooses to return home in the event of childbirth is often never able to attain the same opportunities as before rearing children. Typically, women can only reenter the workforce via temporary, part-time and menial labor after quitting her fulltime job (Jung, 2024). This reality creates the well-known stereotype that South Korean women's lives "expire" at age 30 (Song, 2016). This expiration date stereotype is further corroborated by the phenomenon of what the Korean government coined the "L-shaped curve" where women with tertiary educations drop out of the workforce in their thirties due to marriage and/or child rearing and never return (hence creating an L-shaped curve when viewing employment trends) (Song, 2016). In addition, only 29.9% of South Korean women who have children under the age of three work, which pales in comparison to the US where 54.2% of mothers with children under the age of three continue to work (Song, 2016). In the most extreme cases where women *do* try to continue work while also fulfilling their expected role as caregivers have faced fatal consequences. For instance, one mother died of a cerebral hemorrhage one week after her return from maternity leave due to working excessively (until 3am) to care for her 3 children while also juggling work (Jung, 2024).

The prevalence of this issue has led to the emergence of the slang term “working-mom overwork death” (Jung, 2024)/

Even though South Korea’s capitalist society suggests that the tradeoff for childbirth is too high and bars women from reaching her fullest potential in the workplace, women are continually pressured by Confucian aspects of South Korean society to give birth and become mothers—especially in the context of low birth rates. In fact, instances where women answered “no” to interview questions asking if they were planning on giving birth, women are labeled as “selfish” toward their country for not giving birth, rather than more dependable (Jung, 2024). Therefore, South Korean women are stretched in between two different realities: pressured to meet capitalist demands for success while at the same time demanded to reproduce for the sake of South Korean society.

South Korean Anti-Feminism

An aspect that significantly differs from North Korean society is the prominence of social media platforms in South Korea. With the emergence of social media in the early 2000s, South Korean society quickly became enveloped by the online world. Around 90% of the South Korean population uses social media, averaging around 10 hours per day (Jung, 2024). Online communities and social media have become a locus where South Koreans participate in discourse, and by doing so, shift social thought, beliefs, and interests.

Specifically, anti-feminist movements proliferated online communities at the start of the 2000s. This timeline interestingly parallels the elimination of the Confucian *hoju* system in 2005 and the emergence of gender equality legislation (Jung, 2024). Therefore, it is to no surprise that anti-feminist groups and rhetoric online follow false narratives of how men have become victims of gender equality and feminist movements (Jung, 2024). Online communities coined

misogynistic terminologies such as “Kimchi-nyeo” or “Kimchi-girl” used to describe women who, “...uses her gender to exploit men while demanding gender equality...” (Kim, 2023). South Korean men believe that they are at a disadvantage to society, and, as the definition of Kimchi-nyeo suggests, women are taking advantage of men’s status. In fact, a study finds that 60% of South Korean men in their 20s hold the incorrect belief that feminism is equivalent to the idea of female supremacy (Kim & Lee, 2022). Scholars Kim and Lee (2022) outline two primary reasons as to why South Korean men feel at a disadvantage: 1. Women’s general increase in employment and salaries pose a threat to their ability to work, and 2. South Korea’s 2-year military requirement for males sets men back in the trajectory of their professional careers. Unlike outright “benevolent sexism” which explicitly expresses hate towards women, South Korean anti-feminist rhetoric pertains to men feeling as though they are a victim in the face of women gaining equal rights and (or, in men’s eyes, more) power (Jung, 2024).

Furthermore, South Korean men leverage online chatrooms and communities to share nonconsensual, violating images of their female peers, strangers, students and girlfriends through utilizing hidden cameras. The act of secretly taking images has become so rampant in South Korea that the term *Molka* (몰카), short for *Mol-lae camera* (몰래카메라), was coined to describe “hidden/secret” cameras (Jung, 2024). *Molka* can occur in a variety of ways either by setting up secret cameras in women’s bathrooms, taking non-consensual images of female coworkers or students, or taking videos and images of one’s girlfriend without their knowledge (Jung, 2024). Once captured, men upload the images or videos onto social media platforms and/or private chatrooms (Jung, 2024). Uploaded videos then subsequently destroy the lives of the victims and severely impact their mental health (Jung, 2024).

Comment sections on *Molka* platforms fester with anti-feminist rhetoric, creating echo chambers of misogyny and utilized as a “cathartic” outlet to take power away from women (Jung, 2024). In fact, men have reported to feel a sense of pleasure for “conquering...women and girls who are otherwise unattainable in their daily lives...” (Jung, 2024, p.166). *Molka* video sites and chatrooms have become so popular, it has developed into a profitable business model (Jung, 2024). Creators of *Molka* sites market videos by emphasizing the suffering their victims endure as a result of the footage being posted—the greater the victim's suffering, the more valuable the *Molka* video becomes (Jung, 2024). For instance, when a *Molka* victim commits suicide due to the social and psychological impacts of the uploaded video, the video becomes more profitable and viewed (Jung, 2024).

The growing repertoire of anti-feminism across the internet creates a heightened divide between South Korean men and women. Anti-feminism online, whether through the creation of derogatory terms or *Molka*, suppress women into further subjugation in society and feeds into the idea that women are to be punished if she urges for equality or more rights. *Molka* thrives on the nonconsensual sexualization of women, undermining their agency through patriarchal power structures that reinforce gender imbalances—echoing the hierarchical ideals often associated with Confucian thought. Perhaps, in the light of modernizing South Korea, men feel the need to revisit Confucian ideals, finding ways to assert male power over women.

Unresponsive and Patriarchally Backed Law Enforcement

Gender tensions in South Korea were further aggravated by the *Gangnam* Station murder in 2016, where a male perpetrator murdered a woman unknown to him and outwardly claimed that he was motivated by his “hate for women” and because he felt that women “ignored and humiliated him all of his life” (Park, et. al, 2016). Leading to even more of a public outrage, the

police claimed that the perpetrator's unstable mental health primarily led to the murder and dismissed any sort of claims that suggested the incident to be a form of gender-based violence (Jung, 2024). After resolving the case, the police chief even falsely stated "There is no hate crime in South Korea yet" (Jung, 2024. p. 133). Outraged by such claims, by the end of 2016, half of south Korean women in their 20s claimed to be a feminist (Jung, 2024).

Similarly, in 2018 a case known as the *Isu* Station attack occurred at a bar where two women were severely injured by three men. Released footage of the incident quickly sparked a gender-divided debate online: male viewers justified the three men's violent response as they pointed to the women's aggravating and offensive behavior toward the men, while other female viewers interpreted the attack as a gender-based hate crime against women (The Korean Herald, 2018). Further deepening the debate, one of the female victims of the case posted that she believed she was assaulted due to her "having short hair" and "not wearing makeup"—a South Korean telltale sign of being a part of the feminist movement *Escape the Corset* (The Korean Herald, 2018). That said, both sides of the dispute used offensive language in reference to the building gender war. One of the women called the men *Hannam-chung* (한남충), a degrading terminology referring to Korean men, while one of the men refuted by accusing the women of being a part of *Megalia*, a well-known radical, online feminist group (Oh, 2023). Regardless of gendered discourse online, the police deemed the case to be a "two-sided scuffle" (The Korean Herald, 2018) Furthermore in 2021, the Supreme Court charged the primary perpetrating male for assault, only fining him with 767 USD, and in contrast, charged one of the two women for insult, fining her 1,425 USD (Lee, 2018). Ultimately, the Supreme Court claimed that the woman's insult ultimately "provoked" the escalation of the attack and therefore justified the

higher charge at hand (Lee, 2018). These legal actions worked to silence the reality of gender discrimination in South Korea and alleviated men of taking true responsibility of their actions.

Figure 1. Woman's injuries from the Isu Station attack (Lee, 2018)



The *Gangnam* murder and *Isu* Station attack just begin to highlight the harsh realities South Korean women face as victims of gender-based violence. Of all violent crimes in South Korea, approximately 89% of victims are women (Jung, 2024). Specifically, women are disproportionately affected by sexual assault, where around 90% of sexual assault victims are female (Kim & Lee, 2022). In response to these disparities, the government introduced measures such as the Violence Against Women Act of 2019, aimed to provide protections and support systems for victims of sexual assault and violence (Kim & Lee, 2022). However, anti-feminists criticized the act, claiming that the act unfairly targeted men and increased the likelihood of men being presumed guilty in court (Kim & Lee, 2022). These criticisms, however, fail to acknowledge the already patriarchally biased laws existent in Korea's criminal law system. For instance, South Korea's qualification of rape requires the victim to have been physically overpowered or intimidated by the perpetrator, which functionally overlooks common cases of hierarchical coercion in the workplace (Jung, 2024). This legal qualification of rape makes litigation against perpetrators extremely difficult as only 30% of cases reported to women's

hotlines qualify as rape under South Korean law (Jung, 2024). Even if cases do reach court, around half of the cases are dismissed (Jung, 2024). Furthermore, even if women do muster the courage to file a lawsuit, men frequently utilize South Korea's defamation laws—establishing defamation as an offensive, punishable crime—to retaliate against their victim's claims of rape (Jung, 2024).

Additionally, even when there *are* viable laws in place to punish male perpetrators, the decisions made in court are still extremely biased. Legally speaking, those found guilty of filming *molka* are eligible to up to five years in jail or receiving a hefty fine of 40,000 USD (Jung, 2024). Though, between 2015 to 2020, South Korean prosecutors dismissed around 60% of *molka* cases received by the police (Jung, 2024). Furthermore, even if the cases are taken to court, only 6% of convictions ended in jailtime and 60% of cases resulted in minimal fines of around 2,700 USD or less—far below the punishment outlined by the law (Jung, 2024). For instance, a man who was found guilty of taking 20,000 *mollka* photos and videos of underaged girls was not punished since he was “studying to get a job” (Jung, 2024). Similar cases also absolved men of their responsibilities as judges did not want to hamper the men's futures, studies in school, or their recent marriages (Jung, 2024).

Therefore, South Korea's legal system further oppresses women and enforces the idea that men's futures and success are far more protected and valued than his female counterpart. The inaction or dismissal of gender-based violence in the legal sphere suggest to South Korean women that they lack fundamental protections against men. These notions uphold traditional neo-Confucian values underlining the importance of men in society and the subjugation of women. Additionally, when women do act in ways that push men to face consequences, women are quickly ridiculed, punished or dismissed entirely. This suggests that even though South

Korean women are technically equal under the South Korean constitution, the Confucian subordination of women's livelihoods still exists in modern legal decisions.

Handling Pieces of the Living: South Women and Feminist Movements

“When the hen crows, the house ~~is ruined~~ will prosper” | “~~암탉이 울면 집안이 망한다~~

잘된다” ~(reclaimed) Korean Proverb

South Korea’s rampant growth in anti-feminism and oppression did not go unanswered. The current sociopolitical landscape, while heavily patriarchal, still leaves room for women to collectively respond to their oppression. South Korean women’s responses exist both in the private and public sphere. Specifically, Korean feminist literature and formation of feminist groups all can be understood as a form of resistance against the South Korean patriarchy. Each form of feminist resistance acts within the existing and present resources of South Korean society and through their efforts, seeks to create pathways to escape oppression.

Feminist Literature

Presently, there is a multitude of significant, largely disputed feminist literature and media circulating South Korean society. Namely, the novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (2016) by Cho Nam-ju and *The Vegetarian* (2007) by Han Kang received nationwide and worldwide attention. *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* gained traction both nationwide and worldwide, selling over 1 million copies total by 2019 (Kim, 2019). In addition, Han Kang received the 2024 Nobel Prize in literature for *The Vegetarian*.

Both novels are immersed with messages against the patriarchy, speaking to the oppression women face within their everyday lives. The authors assert the notion that the current South Korean patriarchal standards women live under in their everyday lives are not habitable and that the only escape is through a disconnect from reality—where the main characters of both novels develop psychological illnesses of defiant alter egos which are harshly ridiculed by their

family members. The novels illustrate the stifling societal expectations that drive women to insanity, and on a deeper level, suggests that those that defy norms in Korean society are viewed as mentally ill (similar to the aforementioned *hwa-byung* mentioned in the introduction). Cho and Kang's stories both assert that the only way to escape such norms in both novels is to "...simply let fall the slender thread that...[keeps] her connected with everyday life" (Kang, 2007). These notions are distinctly different than those from Western feminist literature, like the *A Doll's House*, where defiance is represented in explicit and cognitively intentional actions of the main characters. Instead, the two protagonists' strongest and perhaps only method of pushing back is to completely disconnect from their everyday lives.

More specifically, In *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* the main character, Kim Jiyoung, struggles with what her husband believes to be postpartum depression. The novel oscillates between uncovering the roots of Jiyoung's past, highlighting experiences of explicit and implicit misogyny and sexism, and present time where Jiyoung grapples with the loss of her professional career due to her decision to become a stay-at-home mother. Despite Jiyoung's husband's offer to take paternity leave, she ultimately decides to quit her job due to high costs of daycare, her husband's higher income (in relation to hers), and intense pressures from her in-laws—a very common decision among South Korean women. Similar to the realities of North Korean women in the 1980s, traditional Confucian values hold women to a high degree of expectations to exit the workforce in order to singlehandedly manage domestic labor.

As a result, Jiyoung begins to experience psychological breaks where she becomes almost "possessed" by other voices that speak out for her in times of stress. For instance, during the Korean harvest festival, *chu-seok* (추석), Jiyoung awakens at dusk to tirelessly cook alongside her mother-in-law to prepare copious amounts of food for the holiday. Traditionally,

all daughters-in-law are expected to assist with extensive meal preparation alongside their mother-in-law. When Jiyoung's mother-in-law's family members express respectful concern and urge Jiyoung's mother-in-law to rest, the mother-in-law brushes off their worries and asks Jiyoung to also reassure the family members that preparing for *chu-seok* had not been too strenuous. Instead of obliging as culturally expected, Jiyoung suddenly becomes “possessed,” disconnected from reality, and begins speaking from her mother's perspective. Stunning the family members in utter shock and disbelief, Jiyoung states:

“...I must say my piece... as you know, the holidays are a time for families to gather. But they're not just for your family. They're for my family too... You should at least let our daughter come home when your daughter comes to visit you” (Cho, 2016, p.10-11)

From the voice of her own mother, Jiyoung contests Korean patriarchal norms for placing unfair pressures of daughters-in-law to prioritize her husband's extended family without being able to return to her own family. In this scene, Jiyoung can only protest the burdens of being a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law through dissociation from herself rather than consciously refuting through her own voice. In the novel, Jiyoung's condition also causes her to entirely forget her bouts of dissociation, further distancing the character from any real sense of agency over her contestations. Cho's decision to frame Jiyoung's rejection of patriarchy as a mental health condition critiques how South Korean society often views resistance to traditional gender roles as abnormal or unacceptable. The novel suggests that, within this social framework, any type of rejection from the norm is so unthinkable that it can only be explained through the lens of mental illness.

One of the central scenes in the novel is when Jiyoung is called a *mom-chung* (맘충) in a cafe, which can be translated to mom-roach. Mom-roach is a derogatory terminology stemming from anti-feminist platforms, used to characterize stay-at-home mothers as people who

exploitatively live off their husband's paycheck without having to work (Cho, 2016). Women are at a constant loss, expected to stay at home and sacrifice their careers but at the same time criticized for not working and reaping the benefits of their husband's paycheck. Jiyoung complains to her husband about the incident, exasperated, she exclaims, "Am I stealing from you? I suffered deathly pain having our child. My routine, my career, my dreams, my entire life, my self-- I gave it all up to raise our child. And I've become a vermin." (Cho, 2016, p. 154). This quote further illustrates the impossible Confucian and capitalist divide that South Korean mothers face in her everyday: punished for continuing work and rejecting Confucian expectations or punished for being a stay-at-home mother and becoming a capitalistic burden on her husband.

The Vegetarian functions in a similar way, deploying the main character, Yeong-hye's, vegetarianism as the form of defiance. Spurred by a violent dream one night, Yeong-hye begins purging her diet from meat, ultimately angering her husband and her own parents. Meat eating is a large part of Korean culture and described by one of the characters as "...a fundamental human instinct, which means vegetarianism goes against human nature...It just isn't natural." (Kang, 2007, p. 29). Kang symbolically utilizes meat eating and vegetarianism to comment on the patriarchy. Meat eating, which tends to be associated with masculinity, represents the South Korean patriarchal norm, whereas Yeong-hye's adamant break from eating meat shows a defiance of the patriarchy. Therefore, this novel also speaks to Korean society's perspective that the rejection of the patriarchy is something to be viewed as diabolical and unnatural.

Along with her vegetarianism, Yeong-hye progressively becomes more mentally deranged throughout the novel and loses immense weight from her diet. Her husband tries to demand Yeong-hye to change her diet, but he complains to her father that "...she still goes ahead

and defies me” (Kang, 2007, p.32). Yeong-hye’s husband resorts to one of the only ways he can continue to assert his power which is through sex, carrying out marital rape and describing it as “...though [Yeong-hye] were a comfort woman dragged in against her will, and I was the Japanese soldier demanding her services” (Kang, 2007, p. 36). This rhetoric closely parallels *Molka* viewer’s cathartic pleasure in asserting control over women by non-consensually exploiting their bodies sexually. Additionally, Kang’s direct reference to comfort women and the colonial Japanese rule over Korea suggests a strong message that women’s bodies and selves are constantly being “colonized” by the Korean patriarchy.

Yeong-hye’s family eventually conducts an intervention to her vegetarianism, where her dad, out of shame and anger, violently force-feeds Yeong-hye meat cascading into Yeong-hye’s violent suicide attempt and eventual admittance into a mental institution. By the end of the novel, Yeong-hye rejects all forms of food and wishes for death, yet the hospital keeps her alive against her will, force feeding her through violent procedures involving medical tubes and sedation. No matter how much Yeong-hye rejects her life under such patriarchy, it is continuously forced upon her. By metaphorically utilizing meat as a representation of patriarchy, like Cho, Kang represents ways a woman’s “vegetarianism” or resistance to patriarchal norms is viewed as an unnatural concept in South Korean society.

In-hye, Yeong-hye’s sister remains as the only caretaker left for Yeong-hye since both her husband and parents abandoned her out of shame and spite. In-hye, who is a single mother, further contemplates her life throughout her time visiting Yeong-hye at the mental institution. One poignant quote remarks,

“[In-hye] had never lived. Even as a child, as far back as she could remember, she had done nothing but endure... Her devotion to doing things the right way had been unflagging, all her success had depended on it... but she was nothing but a

child who had never lived... her life had never belonged to her" (Kang, 2007, p. 165-168).

This quote reflects how, even in In-hye's case, where she had been "devoted to doing things the right way," ultimately led her to feel as if she had "never lived." In-hye's perspective is particularly significant, as it speaks to the hardships faced by those who live complacently under the patriarchy. While her sister Young-hye's defiance was met with entrapment, institutionalization, and forced feeding, In-hye's compliance with societal norms still led her to feel trapped in her own life. Through Kang's novel, she illustrates how the constraining realities of the South Korean patriarchy consume women from their very inception.

Both novels act as a cry for help, commenting on the suffocation women experience in their everyday lives and expectations asserted by the South Korean patriarchy. Cho and Kang both represent their main character's form of resistance as the refusal to engage in the expectations placed upon them. It is no coincidence that both novels address anti-patriarchal messages via Jiyoung and Young-hye's mental illness and rejection of everyday life. These two renowned works of feminist literature uniquely present ways to fight South Korean patriarchy through disengagement with aspects of everyday life (meat eating or rejecting specific everyday decisions), differing from Western feminist literature's approach which often illustrates conscious and intentional resistance to the system. In other words, Cho and Kang illustrate ways selectively disengaging from expected behaviors in their everyday life can exist as powerful forms of resistance.

Spirit Sending Campaigns and Responses to Feminist Literature

The strength behind an individual's decision to disengage with patriarchal expectations is even reflected in women's efforts in combatting anti-feminist response to feminist literature. After the release of feminist literature and films, including the film adaptation of *Kim Jiyoung*,

Born 1982 (2019), anti-feminists began boycotting films that they considered to be “feminism-stained” movies in hopes to decrease revenue and stifle the success in theaters (Jung, 2024).

When the film *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (2019) was released, men online reacted harshly to the film, giving an online rating average of 2.99 out of 10 in contrast to women viewers who rated the film as a 9.45 out of 10 (Jung, 2024). To counteract anti-feminists’ boycott, the feminist “spirit-sending campaign” grew on social media where women purchased more tickets than they needed to “watch in spirit” and boost ticket sales. As a result, the film,

“...soared straight to the top of the [South Korea] box office in its opening weekend...[it drew] 830,000 moviegoers to 1,486 screens...Due to the success of “Kim Ji Young, Born 1982,” the rest of the top films in theaters all dropped in box-office rankings.” (Lee, 2019).

By utilizing their individual autonomy within their capitalist society, women were able to collectively shift the outcome of the film’s success. Other films, such as *Miss Baek* (2018) featuring a female lead also triumphantly stamped out the anti-feminist boycotts via the spirit sending campaign (Jung, 2024). South Korean women were able to strategically exercise their everyday choices (i.e. buying a ticket) causing a quiet but impactful disruption to anti-feminist rhetoric without a complete upheaval of the system itself. Rather than challenging Confucian and patriarchal structures upfront, women act to degrade it from the inside out. This method of resistance, I argue, is rather unique to South Korean society as it targets specific actions women can take within the societal confines (purchasing a movie ticket) and leverages the power of collective voice through the culmination of individual action.

In contrast, when idol Irene from K-pop group Red Velvet independently admitted to reading the novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, her male fans began harassing Irene by posting images of them burning photo cards of Irene (Cho, 2020). One user commented in their post, “She should know that most of her fans are male...She has virtually come out as a feminist, and

I'm no longer her fan" (Lee, 2019). While Irene's intentions behind her admitting to reading the novel may not have been her attempting to speak loudly about her feminist beliefs, it certainly confirms that resisting in a way that suggests independent and outward declarations against the patriarchy may ultimately be more damaging than effective. Rather than outright pushback, resistance expressed through small, tangible decisions is more accepted and influential in South Korean society.

Collectivizing Feminist Voices: Modern Day Feminist Movements

In like manner to the Spirit-Sending Campaign, other feminist groups began percolating in online spaces amid a rapidly evolving digital landscape in South Korea. These spaces have become crucial arenas for activism, allowing women to organize, resist, and participate in discourse apart from other oppressive social arenas. Online communities have allowed for women's marginalized voices to exist without being shut down or silenced. This section aims to explore how various feminist movements have strategically leveraged cultural components of South Korean society to confront and reject everyday forms of patriarchy.

Megalia

One of the first outwardly feminist online platforms, Megalia, was founded in 2015 as a direct retaliation to the growing misogynistic online discourse (Jung, 2024). Megalia originated in the peak of Korea's MERS outbreak in 2015, when two South Korean women contracted MERS on their flight over to Hong Kong (Jung, 2024). Korean news outlets shared that the women broke quarantine measures due to "communication problems," but men ignited comment sections, blaming women for their wrongdoings calling the women "bitches" and crazed "Kimchi Girls" (Jung, 2024). The MERS incident was merely indicative of the growing anti-feminist rhetoric online where other extremely harmful terminology surfaced in reference to

men's disgust and anger towards women (Jung, 2024). To name a few, men refer to women as "orcs" if they have "plain" features, "plastic surgery monsters" if women appear to have too much plastic surgery, "abortion-roaches" describe women who have terminated their pregnancy, and "flower snakes" for those women that report sexual assault (Jung, 2024).

To address the anti-feminist uproar, Megalia was founded, combining "MERS" and "Egalia's Daughters" to create their name (Jung, 2024). Egalia's Daughters refer specifically to Gerd Brantenberg's Norwegian feminist novel where she illustrates a reality where gender roles are reversed (Jung, 2024). Living up to their namesake, Megalia users employed "mirroring strategies" where members created spin-offs of men's derogatory slang to counteract their misogynistic terminology (Jung, 2024). For instance, Megalia referred to men as "penis snakes" for using sex appeal to receive favors from women and "shoot-flee roaches" for men that abandoned a woman in her pregnancy (Jung, 2024). Megalia also flipped sexist Korean phrases such as women should be beat "once every three days" to men should be beat for "every single breath" (Jung, 2024).

With the creation of new terminology, Megalians began filling comment sections to controversial news stories to drown out existing anti-feminist comments (Jung, 2024). Megalians reclaimed existent harmful anti-feminist rhetoric and repurposed terminologies mirroring the way men utilized it—only this time, reversing women's role in the position of power rather than the target. By functionally utilizing the same strategies as men, Megalia's mirroring strategy challenges and aims to showcase the blasphemy of anti-feminist language and beliefs. Rather than retaliating the patriarchy through direct upheaval, South Korean feminists utilize already existing pieces of their society and creatively handle them by using the same pathways that oppress women.

Megalia also serves as a safe network for women to connect with one another, sharing everyday experiences of sexism as Korean women—whether through critiquing sexist advertisements or raising awareness about the dangers of men using date rape drugs on women who refused sexual intercourse on dates the men had paid for (Jung, 2024). Members also use Megalia as a place to indulge in their anger where some wrote posts imagining a South Korean society with reversed gender roles in the workplace, reminiscent of *Egalia's Daughters* (Jung, 2024). Therefore, Megalia became a hub where women could implant feminist ideas in already existing misogynistic pathways, proposing a reimagined reality of female superiority to challenge the absurdity of patriarchal structures.

Movements for Women's Singlehood

Another form of South Korean feminist resistance involves the rejection of buying into patriarchal structures of marriage, sex, bearing children and dating, also known as the 4B movement. Rather than fully acting towards the complete upheaval of the patriarchal system, the radical 4B feminist movement, founded in 2010, suggests women can exercise their agency of saying “no” to becoming a part of a system that further entraps them. The 4B movement establishes four primary “no’s”—which is represented by the Korean prefix “bi” (bi) meaning “no”—for women to reject in their life choices in order to break down patriarchal structures. Specifically, the four Bs include: no marriage, no heterosexual sex, no dating, and no children (Lee & Jeong, 2021). 4B frames their movement as a source of “self-help” for women to navigate their everyday life (Lee & Jeong, 2021). Through the active disengagement from entrapping patriarchal systems and withholding the 4Bs in their everyday life, the movement contends that women can take control and live lives of freedom (Lee & Jeong, 2021). Simultaneously, by making the extreme decision of not engaging in sex or relationships, the 4B

movement also indirectly functions to comment on the intensity of patriarchal expectations and thereby force men to reflect on their role in creating such realities (Jung, 2024). Through withholding sex and relationships with men, women take back the control that men inherently dictate in patriarchal sexual or romantic relationships.

Functioning under the 4B tenets, Kang Han-Byul and Ha Hyun-Ji also formulated a group known as “Elite without Marriage, I am going Forward” or EMIF in 2010. With around 100 members, EMIF creates a space for women who have decided solely against marriage to build community as well as grow professionally (Jung, 2024). Members can spearhead projects of their own that either support women deciding against marriage or promote the campaign (Jung, 2024). Founders Kang and Ha also hoped that in building a community, it encourages women to remain single with the knowledge that even in her singleness, they still have a community to turn to. Therefore, EMIF functions to fulfill the collectivist needs of South Korean women while uplifting single women in their professional endeavors. By detaching from Confucian structures that suggest for a woman to return to the household, women can continue to freely excel in professional spaces similar to their male counterparts—just as feminist novels *The Vegetarian* and *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* asserts.

Lee and Jeong (2021) argue that the 4B movement originated out of a “flow” of feminist and anti-feminist discourses throughout the years. Lee and Jeong (2021) depict the 4B movement as a natural product of women’s discussion surrounding gender related conflict and their perception of their own autonomy within the system. Collective recognition of systemic gender violence and sexual assault, sexist standards in a marriage, and sex-based discrimination led to a growing consciousness among South Korean women of the harms of conforming to patriarchal expectations (Jung, 2024). By withholding one’s decision to get married, have sex, date, and

have children, women gain more autonomy and are no longer pigeonholed to be a part of a Korean male's narrative. Therefore, the 4B movement sheds light on the power of female agency in the deliberate refusal to fulfill roles centered on male desire. As one of the founders of the 4B movement, Kang Han-Byul, puts it, “... ‘no marriage’ is not just a lifestyle. It's a way of trying to bring down the patriarchy” (Jung, 2024, p. 272).

While the 4B movement is certainly a more radical approach than most, there are other groups and movements that suggest decision to stay independent is growing to be more common among South Korean women. In fact, since 2000, the number of women living alone has since tripled, making 1 in 3 households (or a total of 3.4 million households) women living alone (Jung, 2024). A group known as the Eunpyeong Sisters (은평시스터즈) founded in 2018 is a group dedicated to providing a social community for women living alone (Jung, 2024). With an increase of women deciding to live alone to pursue their professions, Eunpyeong Sisters hoped to provide a community where single women could find a sense of belonging in the face of loneliness (Jung, 2024). Rather than stressing any importance of staying single, the group instead works to break down the patriarchal understanding of family, asserting that family can be created outside of a man and his wife (Jung, 2024). Eunpyeong Sisters therefore fulfill women's need for community when living alone in collectivist South Korea, which in effect, challenges the classic understanding of family upheld by the lately abolished *hoju-je* system. Women do not need a man to feel the support of family.

In addition to providing community, Eunpyeong Sisters also hosts workshops to support women living alone, whether that would be through teaching finance management skills or safety tips for living alone (Jung, 2024). Specifically, living alone as a woman in Korea can increase her risk of being fall victim to sexual assault due to the perception that women living alone are

more sexually promiscuous or available (Jung, 2024). This damaging assumption leads to the targeting of young women living alone, making women living alone aged 33-years or younger, 11 times more likely to experience a break-in than her male counterparts (Jung, 2024). To combat such risks, Eunpyeong Sisters recommend ways to decrease the outward facing, public visibility of one's singledom (Jung, 2024). For instance, Eunpyeong Sisters recommend women living alone to order food portion sizes larger than one when getting food delivered and to abstain from hanging pink curtains (Jung, 2024). By encouraging women to create the illusion that they are not alone through small but symbolic decisions, the Eunpyeong Sisters cleverly navigate the patriarchal system—leveraging the perceived presence of men in the household to help protect women living alone.

There are also other groups that work to share information with women to further remove the shackles of the patriarchy and place agency in the woman's hands. For example, a woman by the name of Lee Hyun-Sook hosted "Women Who Fix Home" workshops beginning in 2020, teaching home improvement skills, like plumbing and electricity, in hopes to equip women with the skills that are traditionally assigned to men (Jung, 2024). Ultimately, the Women Who Fix Home workshop identifies aspects of traditional male gender roles that keep women dependent on men and reframe those elements in ways that empower women directly. Knowledge and skills therefore serve as a means of resistance and sever the strings that hold women tied to men. These workshops quickly gained traction and due to high demand, Lee opened dozens more workshops across the nation (Jung, 2024).

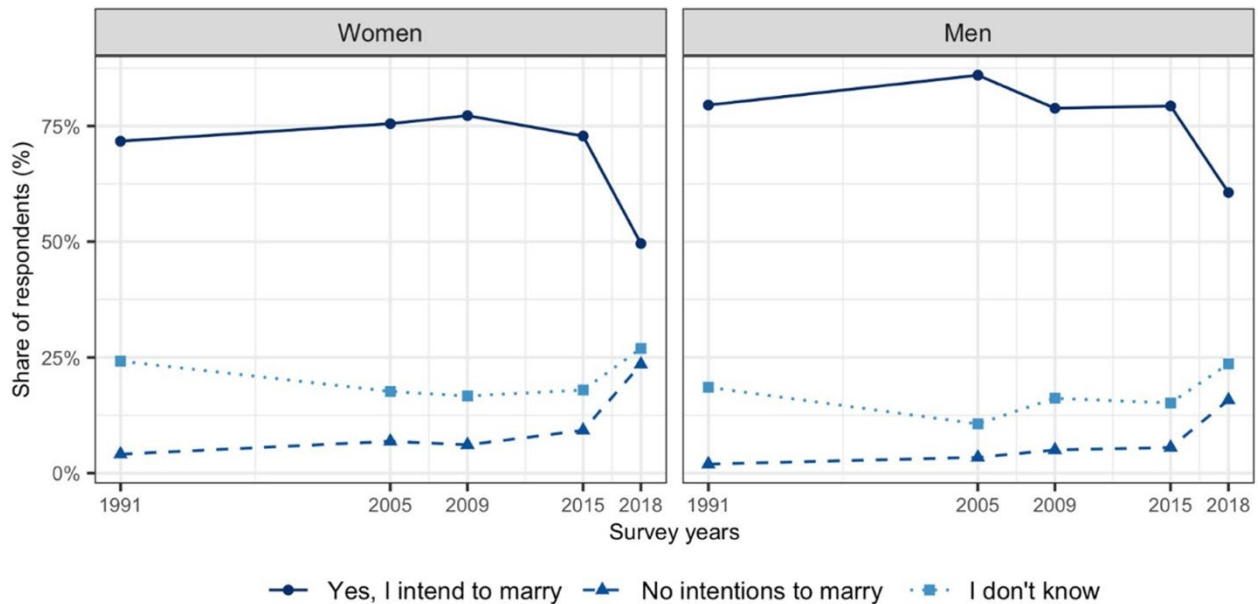
Therefore, these movements work deftly within South Korea's patriarchal system, operating from the inside out to create more livable realities for South Korean women. By staying single, women avoid the predicament of the "expiration date" at age 30, allowing them to

continue their livelihoods not in solitude, but in solidarity with other single women. Engaging in this movement doesn't require women to loudly challenge Confucian standards; instead, they sidestep these norms entirely by rejecting the structures that place them in that predicament—marriage to men. Thus, the 4B movement, along with the decision not to marry and remain single, enables women to live without societal shame, fulfill their economic needs in capitalist Korea, and avoid the stigma of failing to meet Confucian expectations of returning to the household.

Reassemblage in the Present: South Korean Women’s Decision Against Marriage

Examining the shifting nature of decisions within a broader context of national surveys can reveal key indicators of the influence of both feminist and antifeminist discourses. Surveys suggest that South Korean women’s intent to marry fell sharply around 2015/2016 (indicated in *Figure 4.*), overlapping with the rise in feminist movements and the *Gangnam* murder (Lee, et al., 2024). This may suggest that the overall consciousness of women’s oppression and feminist movements lead to actionable change in South Korea’s wider society. To date, marriage rates are at an all-time low, exacerbating the already low birth rates (Chang, et al., 2024). Studies also find that level of education is negatively associated with marriage rates, meaning that the more educated the woman, the less likely it is that she gets married (Chang, et al., 2024).

Figure 4. Women and men’s intent to marry in South Korea from 1991-2018 (Lee, et al., 2024)



On the other hand, one of the greatest predictors for men being unmarried was their personal income and parental assets. In fact, employed men were two times more likely to be married than their unemployed male counterparts (Chang, et al., 2024). Chang and colleagues

(2023) suggest that these statistics illuminate a general societal preference where tangible, monetary value of a man (income and parental assets) is more valued in marriage than his mere educational status. Preference for more monetarily valuable husbands is further supported by Kim and colleague's (2016) case study where they found women with higher SES vocalized that they would willingly not get married to a man if he did not appear to be financially stable. Specifically, one subject shared that she broke up with her boyfriend in fear her parents would be disappointed because "his family was so poor" (Kim, et al., 2016).

The decision to marry itself comes with a high amount of economic and familial pressure within South Korea culture. For one, wedding costs bear a large burden on not only the couple, but also their families. Typically, it has been estimated that weddings in South Korea cost in around \$152,685 USD for men and \$82,212 USD for women (Chang, et al. 2024). Because of the parents' monetary involvement as well as the Confucian standard to respect filial piety, the parent's acceptance and standards for their daughter's husband is valued to the woman themselves. Therefore, not only are women pressured to find a partner that fits their needs, but also that fits their parents' standards as well. As previously mentioned, Kim and colleagues (2016) qualitative study reveals that some women feel they do not want to "disappoint" their parents in their selection of a boyfriend, alluding to the fact that Confucian values still drive thoughts on marriage today. So, considering the personal costs that a woman sacrifices in marriage and caretaking, perhaps if a man does not exceed with monetary benefits, the tradeoff of marriage is no longer beneficial.

Therefore, in current society, it would seem that a woman's individual educational attainment and success in the workplace becomes more central than her marital status. Given the inherently conflicting fusion of South Korea's Confucian and capitalist society, South Korean

women may find that for a woman to attain her fullest potential in her career, marriage should stay out of the picture. Moreover, the exceeding pressures women face in the decision to marry to not disappoint her parents, the intent to marry lowers, and her drive to educational and academic success increases. Ultimately, women entirely evade the conundrum of having to unsustainably fulfill both traditional and capitalistic expectations by choosing a life without marriage. In doing so, she no longer must be confronted by the pressures of the patriarchy and the potential for disappointing her family if she defies expectations. By not engaging in marriage at all, she becomes free of the patriarchal realities that strangle her.

Comparative Analysis and Conclusions: Understanding the Construction of Adapted Realities

Culture is an ever-evolving entity, kept alive by the decisions of individuals that actively reconfigure existing components into new realities. Under the oppressive patriarchies of both North and South Korea, women have functioned within their respective social arenas to produce more livable realities. Despite the significant ideological differences between the socialist regime in North Korea and the capitalist democracy of South Korea, both nations are grounded in shared Confucian values that historically tether women to the domestic sphere, reinforcing the concept of *anchae*, where women are kept within the home. Such Confucian ideals serve as foundational components to establishing the patriarchal gender hierarchies practiced in the everyday lives of 1994 North Koreans and present-day South Koreans.

Most prominently, Confucianism contributes to North and South Korea's conception of womanhood as intrinsically tied to domestic duties, and by extension, motherhood. While both North and South Korean societies have adapted in ways that include women in their workforce, each society continues to uphold the expectation that a woman must place motherhood above all else. Specifically, North Korean Communist Motherhood ideology utilizes components of Confucianism and blends it with the socialist identity, claiming that a mother's selflessness for her child inherently aligns with core socialist principles of working for the masses. Motherhood is centralized to the North Korean communist identity as exemplified through Kim Jong-Il's adoption of the title as "Mother Kim Jong-Il" or the government body's title as the "mother party" (S.Kim, 2014). Although the North Korean principle of motherhood arguably transcends gendered embodiment, Confucian influence has firmly rooted the act of mothering within the female identity. North Korea's August 3rd People's Consumer goods Production Decision in

1984—the law exempting women from the workforce to tend to housework—further confirms the North Korean perception that household work is only held to the gendered identity of wives and cannot be generalized to men (Lankov, 2013).

In parallel, South Korean society also interacts with patriarchal Confucian components as represented through the gendered expectations of women to tend to her duties of the “marriage package.” Under the marriage package, it is expected that women should spend more time tending to household duties while the male tends to work duties—a similar division to the Confucian ideas of *anchae* and *sarangchae* (Park, 1992a). Additionally, a woman is expected to act as an “education manager,” often equivalent to a full-time job, for her children to succeed in South Korea's competitive education culture (Yang, 2011). Furthermore, South Korean local governments systematically reward women who exhibit “exemplary” care toward her in-laws with “filial daughter-in-law” awards, upholding Confucian characteristics of being a good wife (Jung, 2024). Therefore, both 1994 North Korea and 21st century South Korea interact with Confucian principles, employing the Joseon Dynasty originated components in adapted forms to fit socialist and capitalist societies respectively.

Though, simultaneously, both North and South Korean cultures expect that women, when available, should also participate as good workers in the public sphere. Both capitalist and socialist Koreas move away from the Confucian idea of purely confining women to the household. For instance, North Korea sought to establish gender equality in the workforce in the 1950s and 60s in the Ch’ollima Movement and Triple Revolution policies (Jung & Dalton, 2006). Through these gender equality policies, the North Korean government claimed to alleviate the “double burden” of motherhood through instituting state-run programs that assisted in domestic labor (Park, 1992b). In practice, however, these policies not only continued to

perpetuate the notion of women being inherently in charge of domestic labor, but it also justified the state's extraction of women's labor. Additionally, in South Korea, women are also seen as viable bodies to exploit for labor before their expiration date of age 30 (Song, 2016).

Particularly, under Park Chung-Hee's dictatorship in the 1980s, many women were cheaply employed to fuel rapid industrial growth, only to face expulsion from the workforce once they reached the expected age of marriage (Jung, 2024). Similar dynamics continue into the 21st century as South Korea's "iron ceiling" and wage gap of 30% indirectly compel many women to withdraw from the workforce and return to domestic roles upon marriage (Jung, 2024). In essence, North and South Korea actively employ components of Confucian gender structures while also adapting expectations to fit under each country's respective modern societies. In both contexts, women are expected to tend to her Confucian expectations of domestic labor, while also juggling her duties as a capitalist South or socialist North Korean citizen.

While the two Korea's have a shared adoption of Confucian ideals, in their separation, they have developed into notably different societies and offer uniquely different societal components in their respective milieus. When women are faced with extraneous pressures—either a North Korean famine in 1994 or a South Korean heated gender war—it is to no surprise that each of their differing social landscapes produce distinctly creative outcomes. Viewed through a Creative Syncretic lens, these societal differences reveal varied resources available to women as active agents, enabling them to engage with and generate distinct responses tailored to their specific contexts.

During the North Korean famine of 1994, women were able to adapt their resources of Confucian expectations of motherhood and North Korean socialist ideals to construct new solutions to aid in their individual and familial survival. Women combined Confucian

expectations of motherhood and North Korean *Juche* ideology in creative ways to exit the workforce and participate in black market activities as vendors or sex workers. Under the already established 8.3 Decision of 1984, women leveraged her expectation to return home for domestic duties as a pathway out of a dysfunctional work system and into the black markets. Not only were women functionally able to participate in the black market, but they were also socially and morally legitimized to do so via Confucian Motherhood and *Juche* ideologies. North Korean women were able to creatively partake in black-markets under the pretense that they were doing so for the good of their family as Communist mothers and working to uphold North Korea's self-reliance" through tenets of *Chajusong*—the creative method (Kim, 1983).

Specifically, women took advantage of unproductive factories, porous Sino-Korean borders, and existence of kitchen gardens to produce goods from the home and sell in the black market. Furthermore, women also leveraged their oppressed, sexual identities as a method to gain either exit into China through the sex trade or sustain a life as a sex worker in Jangmadang, selling her services to rich merchants in the market (Lankov, et al., 2013). In cases where married women were penalized for engaging in sex work, they were less severely punished than her unmarried counterparts suggesting the state itself also condoned women's actions as a pursuit of fulfilling her expected role as a mother (Lim, 2005). As a result, North Korean women increasingly turned to black market labor during the famine, effectively reconfiguring traditional expectations of womanhood and nationalist ideals to legitimize their roles within the black market. In more recent generations, women's everyday acts of creative adaptation in 1994 have contributed to emerging cultural narratives that position women as primary breadwinners, while casting men as increasingly ineffective.

On the other hand, 21st century South Korean women are ensnared by a Catch-22 predicament where Confucian expectations of motherhood clash with capitalist demands. While high standards of capitalistic and educational success are held to both South Korean men and women, Confucian expectations often intercept a woman's ability to continue in her career. When faced with domestic responsibilities in the face of marriage or child rearing, women are expected to take on the full-time role as a mother, sacrificing her career. Other factors in South Korean society—such as a 30% wage gap, employer bullying that pushes mothers out of their careers, and limited opportunities for re-entry into the workforce—offer limited pathways where women quitting her job and relying on a husband's income becomes the most practical choice for survival (Jung, 2024). Women who choose to continue working while also taking on her Confucian role as a mother can face deadly consequences as seen in “overworking mom death” (Jung, 2024). And yet, even if women *do* abide by her Confucian demands and exit the workforce for the sake of her children, stay-at-home mothers are often scrutinized for being financially dependent “*mom-chungs*,” or parasites that leech off their husbands’ labor (Cho, 2016). Therefore, the components of society of South Korean culture trap women under two different pressures. Moreover, when women advocate for gender equality, South Korean anti-feminist groups often interpret these efforts as a form of oppression against men. As a result, some South Korean men seek to “reclaim” their perceived loss of power through both legal channels—such as filing defamation suits in response to women's accusations of sexual assault—and through acts of gender violence, including digital forms of sexual harassment like *molka* (Jung, 2024).

Therefore, under such complex and conflicting social pressures, South Korean women must creatively induce new escapes from her oppression from Confucian and capitalist duality.

To do so, South Korean women use forms of rejection to distance themselves from Confucian ideals allowing her to more fully participate in the capitalist work force. Recognizing the constraints imposed by Confucian expectations of motherhood and the limited access to overt forms of advocacy, women exercise their agency by choosing to reject participation in the institution of marriage. Feminist movements, like the 4B movement and Eunpyeong Sisters, demonstrate collective decisions to increasingly reject marriage and to stay single (Jung, 2024). This decision grants women a new reality where they can harness their freedom and continue to participate in the workforce without the burden or guilt associated with failing to meet traditional expectations of wifehood. The decision to stay single or unmarried also presents a quieter pathway of resistance, one that cannot be manipulated or confronted by anti-feminist rhetoric as more overt forms of South Korean feminism must face. This shift is further reflected in recent feminist literature such as *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (2016) and *The Vegetarian* (2007), both of which highlight the oppressive nature of patriarchal norms and emphasize the power of disengaging from patriarchally based demands in everyday life. These narratives reveal how South Korean women reimagine life outside of marriage, shedding Confucian burdens while still fulfilling societal roles, such as those demanded by capitalism, in ways that may ultimately position them for greater success with fewer social barriers.

Beyond literature, South Korean women also reclaim agency within arenas historically dominated by men, including the capitalist marketplace and anti-feminist rhetoric. For instance, in the Spirit Sending campaign, women strategically leverage their abilities to act in capitalistic means by purchasing a surplus of movie tickets, countering anti-feminist boycotts and ensuring the success of feminist-themed films. By reversing the effects of these boycotts, feminist organizers harnessed consumer power, turning capitalist mechanisms into tools of resistance.

Additionally, in the radical online feminist group *Megalia*, members utilize mirroring strategies of anti-feminist rhetoric, flipping originally misogynistic terminologies to creative feminist-based messages (Jung, 2024). By appropriating and rearticulating the very rhetoric used to oppress them, these women subvert patriarchal discourse from within, turning accepted cultural scripts into a means of resistance. In doing so, anti-feminist men are not only confronted but also compelled to experience the emotional and rhetorical impact of their own arguments. Colloquially speaking, men are being made to “taste their own medicine.” This mirroring approach somewhat resembles strategies used in South Korea’s 4B movement, where women reformulate traditional domestic roles by means of rejection and lead lives that run parallel to men in the workforce. In both cases, South Korean women engage with pre-existing patriarchal structures, not by dismantling them outright, but by rerouting their power to amplify female agency and critique cultural norms from within.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this thesis provides an in-depth examination of the cultural factors influencing gender research in both North and South Korea, the broad landscape of social components in both North and South Korean society made it difficult to address all possible aspects of society that influence gender dynamics. Specifically, if granted the opportunity, I would like to further research and discuss ways socioeconomic status (SES) confounds a woman’s ability to interact with creative pathways to escape forms of oppression. For instance, I would want to explore whether women of higher socioeconomic status experience greater or lesser pressure to conform to traditional Confucian ideals compared to their lower SES counterparts. Additionally, I would want to investigate ways SES confounds an individual’s compliance with gender structures more generally speaking. Another aspect that this thesis does not consider is the exploration of

race, specifically in the context of South Korea, and ways other populations or migrants—those who are not ethnically South Korean—are impacted by cultural expectations, or if they are left out of the picture completely.

In terms of future directions, it would be my hope to further expand on the previously mentioned limitations, but also to explore other case studies with a similar model utilized in this thesis. Researching US gender dynamics is of particular interest in relation to this work as the South Korean 4B movement has also proliferated online spaces in the US, becoming well-discussed on mainstream social media platforms post 2024 presidential election (Padilla, 2024). I would inspect ways that elements of US culture allow for the 4B movement to resonate with American women, especially after the election of Donald Trump. Furthermore, on the other side of the globe, this body of research would benefit from further inspection of other Asian countries, such as Japan or China, to understand ways Confucianism and communism may impact gender similarly or differently to compare the current case studies presented in this thesis. Ultimately, I hope this thesis and line of future research furthers our understanding of cultural adaptations, and ways we, as actors, have agency within our everyday lives to enact change.

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