

Gender Politics at Home and Abroad

Hyaeweol Choi examines the formation of modern gender relations in Korea from a transnational perspective. Diverging from a conventional understanding of “secularization” as a defining feature of modernity, Choi argues that Protestant Christianity, introduced to Korea in the late-nineteenth century, was crucial in shaping modern gender ideology, reforming domestic practices and claiming new space for women in the public sphere. In Korea, Japanese colonial power – and with it, Japanese representations of modernity – was confronted with the dominant cultural and material power of Europe and the US, which was reflected in Korean attitudes. One of the key agents in conveying ideas of “Western modernity” in Korea was globally connected Christianity, especially US-led Protestant missionary organizations. By placing gender and religion at the center of the analysis, Choi shows that the development of modern gender relations was rooted in the transnational experience of Koreans and not in a simple nexus of the colonizer and the colonized.

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-48743-6 — Gender Politics at Home and Abroad
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Protestant Modernity in Colonial-Era Korea

Hyaeweol Choi



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108487436

DOI: 10.1017/9781108766838

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First published 2020

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Choi, Hyaeweol, author.

Title: Gender politics at home and abroad : Protestant modernity in colonial-era Korea / Hyaeweol Choi.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020014620 (print) | LCCN 2020014621 (ebook) | ISBN 9781108487436 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108766838 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Women – Korea – Social conditions – 20th century. | Sex role – Korea – History – 20th century. | Feminism – Korea – History – 20th century. | Protestantism – Korea – Influence. | Transnationalism. | Korea – Civilization – Western influences. | Korea – History – Japanese occupation, 1910–1945.

Classification: LCC HQ1765.5 .C4453 2020 (print) | LCC HQ1765.5 (ebook) | DDC 305.409519–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020014620>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020014621>

ISBN 978-1-108-48743-6 Hardback

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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>Notes on Romanization and Translations</i>	viii
<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1 Ideology: “Wise Mother, Good Wife”	36
2 Materiality: The Experience of Modern House and Home	73
3 Crossing: Selfhood, Nation, and the World	109
4 Labor: Searching for Rural Modernity	149
Conclusion	190
<i>Bibliography</i>	208
<i>Index</i>	232

Illustrations

1.1	The opening scene of <i>Mimong</i> (Illusive Dream) Source: Korean Film Archive (1936)	page 69
2.1	Missionary home interior Source: The Reverend Corwin & Nellie Taylor Collection, Korean Heritage Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles	78
2.2a	A cradle roll party at the home of Mrs. W. A. Noble Source: Photograph courtesy of the Noble family	80
2.2b	The cradle roll in the South Mountain Church, Pyeng Yang Source: Photograph courtesy of the Noble family	80
2.2c	Cradle roll babies for baptism by W. A. Noble at the Hallusu Church, Manchuria Source: Photograph courtesy of the Noble family	80
2.3	“Home, sweet home” Source: <i>Sin kajǒng</i> 1 (1933)	84
2.4	“Culture house” (文化住宅)? or “annoying house” (蚊禍住宅)? Source: <i>Chosǒn ilbo</i> , April 14, 1930	95
3.1	Barbour Scholarship recipients: Martha Choy, Katherine Kim, and Mary Kim (third, eighth, and tenth from the left in the last row), 1930–1931 Source: HS835, UM Barbour, photograph by Rentschler, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan	137
3.2	The Candle Ceremony of the Intercollegiate Cosmopolitan Club, Columbia University, circa 1921 Source: Harry Edmonds, “A New Endowment for International Friendship,” Educational Interests, 1921–1922 (Rockefeller Family, R62, Series G, Box 10, Folder 68A), Rockefeller Archive Center	141
3.3	Kim Hwallan at the International Missionary Council, Jerusalem, 1928 Source: LC-DIG-matpc-07146 (digital file from original photograph) LC-M361-888 (b&w film copy negative), G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress	146

List of Illustrations	vii
4.1 Women’s collective farm Source: <i>Samch’ŏlli</i> 4, no. 3 (March 1932): 55	150
4.2 Early members of the Korea YWCA Source: Courtesy of the Korea YWCA	173
4.3 Korea YWCA Rural Revitalization Campaign Source: Courtesy of the Korea YWCA	177
5.1 New woman	192
Panel 1 She makes full use of the limited time given to her, reading until midnight	192
Panel 2 She composes poems while cooking	192
Panel 3 She thinks about the successful future of <i>Sin yŏja</i> while mending clothes	192
Panel 4 She works on an article throughout the night until dawn Source: <i>Sin yŏja</i> 4 (1920): 53–6	192
5.2 Ava Milam with her Korean students during her visit to South Korea in 1948 Source: Ava Milam Clark Papers, Oregon State University Libraries Special Collections & Archives Research Center	198
5.3 Ch’oe Isun Source: <i>The Beaver</i> (1937), Ava Milam Clark Papers, Oregon State University Libraries Special Collections & Archives Research Center	203
5.4 Barbour Scholarship recipients: Kim Meri and Ko Hwanggyŏng (third and eighth from the left in the first row), 1933–1934 Source: HS838, UM Barbour, photograph by Rentschler, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan	204
5.5 Ch’oe Yŏngsuk Source: <i>Tonga ilbo</i> , November 29, 1931	204

Notes on Romanization and Translations

Korean words in the text are rendered using the McCune-Reischauer system, with the exception of proper names, for which alternative spellings are well-established. Korean names follow the standard order – family name first – unless a particular name is traditionally rendered in Western order. Unless a source is specified, all translations of Korean texts are mine.

Preface and Acknowledgments

One of the perks of being an academic is having opportunities to travel far and wide for a variety of professional reasons. We go to archives, attend conferences, or present research at various locations – domestic and international. When I launched this book project, “travel” itself became a focus of the analysis as I was tracing the footsteps of Korean women (mostly elite women) who traveled overseas as students or speakers in the 1920s and 1930s. Their experience of travelling and living abroad resonated with me. Sixty years after these women undertook their journeys, I myself became an international student, coming from South Korea to the United States to embark on my graduate studies. Having been in this situation myself and thinking about my predecessors, I became fascinated by the question: What does it mean to cross borders and leave “home,” and how does that border-crossing experience shape subjectivity, work and life? Separated by a century from my foremothers, I wondered how our ventures compared: What did it mean to travel overseas as a colonized woman in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries? How was it possible for them to travel overseas? What did they see and experience? What inspired them? What discouraged them? How was their experience translated in the local and national context when they returned home?

This book takes up a transnational perspective to examine the formation of modern gender relations in Korea under Japanese colonial rule. It focuses on the flow of people, materials, and images to investigate the ways in which transnational encounters played a role in shaping modern gender ideology, reforming domestic practices, coming to grips with a sense of locality and the world, and claiming new space for women in the public sphere. The analysis centers particularly on the role of the global Christian network as a key facilitator in the education of women, travel, and socioeconomic reforms. Diverging from the conventional understanding of modernity as “secularization,” the book foregrounds the thesis that Protestant Christianity, introduced into Korea in the late-nineteenth century, was crucial in shaping modern gender relations along with nationalism and colonial influences. Furthermore, the analysis recognizes the historical context in which Japanese colonial power – and with it, Japanese representations of modernity – was confronted with the

dominant cultural and material power of Europe and the US that Koreans considered the origin of modernity. One of the key agents in conveying “Western modernity” was globally interconnected Christianity, particularly in the form of US-led missionary organizations. By placing gender and religion at the center of the analysis, the book traces the roots of the development of modern gender relations through the *transnational* experience of Koreans rather than in the simple nexus of the colonizer and the colonized, and discusses how such transnational contact helped advance indigenized ideas and reform activities in modern Korea.

This book has been a long time in the making, and there were several momentous occasions and opportunities that significantly shaped it. So many scholars, friends, archivists, and librarians generously shared their time, knowledge, and helpful feedback. Shortly after I finished the manuscript for the book *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea: New Women, Old Ways* (2009), Timothy Lee invited me to join a panel he was organizing for the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion. The paper I presented at that AAR meeting was about the modern construction of the gender ideology, “wise mother, good wife,” and it eventually became Chapter 1 of the present book and the jumping-off point for many of the other issues covered in this volume. I thank Tim for offering me a “launching pad” for a new book project.

Relocating to the Australian National University in 2010 was an important turning point in my intellectual journey and especially in developing a transnational outlook. The sheer fact of relocating to the southern hemisphere and a region that has a fundamentally different relationship to Asia and the Pacific provided an eye-opening shift in perspective. Furthermore, it gave me opportunities to interact and work with a whole new slate of colleagues in East Asian, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific studies. Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Narango Li, Shameem Black, Robert Cribb, Ariel Heryanto, Geremie Barmé, and Simon Avennell were excellent interlocutors in helping me rethink what “Asian studies” or “area studies” are. I am grateful for the constant support and collegiality of my fellow Koreanists at ANU, Roald Maliangkay and Ruth Barraclough, who saw the evolution of the book project from its earliest stages. I am also forever thankful for my interactions with Kim Rubenstein, Margaret Jolly, Hilary Charlesworth, Fiona Jenkins, Carolyn Strange, and my fellow feminists at the ANU Gender Institute. Their curiosity and commitment to intellectual investigation continue to be a great source of inspiration. Precious friendships with Sora Park, Eunro Lee, and Kyungja Jung have been like an oasis – a wellspring of pure joy, comfort, and wisdom.

The University of Iowa became my new home institution in 2018. My department, Religious Studies, has been a very collegial community and the Obermann Center for Advanced Studies has been an ideal site for intellectual collaboration with public engagement. I am especially thankful to Morten

Schlütter, Diana Cates, Jenna Supp-Montgomerie, Bob Gerstmyer, Paul Dilley, Roxanna Curto, John Finamore, Cynthia Chou, Jiyeon Kang, Alyssa Park, Teresa Mangum, and Leslie Schwalm for welcoming me into the UI community and extending their friendship. Beyond the campus, my yogi friends in the “hot room” have helped me find regular doses of fun and camaraderie.

The book project was generously funded by three grants. A Fulbright grant afforded me the opportunity to stay in South Korea for several months to conduct preliminary research. In preparing the Fulbright grant proposal I benefited from conversations with Theodore Jun Yoo, Hwasook Nam, and Seoungsook Moon, who helped me rethink a set of questions related to gender and modernity in colonial-era Korea. As a Fulbrighter, I was affiliated with the Korean Women’s Institute at Ewha Womans University. Its director, Jae Kyung Lee, and other fellow scholars at KWI provided me with an intellectually stimulating community to be part of. I also received a three-year grant from the Australian Research Council (DP140103096) that enabled me to travel globally (Asia, Europe, the US, and Australia) and helped me spend time not only in conventional archives but also a number of rare sites that I would never have had the means to otherwise visit. Many colleagues read and gave me helpful comments on my ARC grant proposal, including Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Robert Cribb, Margaret Jolly, Carolyn Strange, and Tamara Jacka. Finally, a five-year grant from the Academy of Korean Studies Overseas Leading University Program for Korean Studies (AKS-2011-BAA-2016), for which I was the project director, provided additional support for the research that went into this book. The grant supported a number of conferences and speakers that further stimulated and fostered my exploration of transnational history. None of the international travel that I undertook to visit various archives in Korea, Japan, China, the US, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Australia would have been possible without these generous grants.

While conducting research in Korea, I benefited greatly from conversations with scholars and librarians who shared their time and knowledge. I would particularly like to extend my thanks to Yu Sŏnghŭi, Yi Yunhŭi, and Ch’oe Susanna of the Korea YWCA, Chang Kyusik of Chungang University, Kim Sanghŭi of Induk University, Ko Aeran, Cho Han Hyejŏng, Kim Hyŏnmi, and Pak Chinyŏng of Yonsei University, Chŏng Chiyŏng and Lee Jaegyŏng of Ewha Womans University, Pak Ch’ansŭng, Yun Haedong, Hong Yanghŭi, and Im Chihyŏn of Hanyang University, Kim Kyŏngil of the Academy of Korean Studies, Mun Kyŏnghŭi of Changwon University, Yi Songhŭi of Silla University, and Kim Chinsuk of Pusan University. Librarians at the National Institute of Korean History, National Library of Korea, National Assembly Library of Korea, and Korean Film Archive were also very helpful in identifying source materials. For decades now it has been a sacred ritual for me to get together with Ko Chŏng Kaphŭi, Yi Sugin, Chŏng Chiyŏng, and Kim Hyŏnmi

when I am in Korea. I greatly admire their feminist scholarship, and I have derived countless insights and ideas from our conversations. During trips to Tokyo, Kyoto, and Nagoya in Japan, I received invaluable support from Mori Rie of Japan Women's University, Takahashi Yuko of Tsuda College, Tazuke Kazuhisa of the Korea YMCA in Japan, Watanabe Naoki of Musashi University, Ryuta Itagaki and Michael Shapiro of Doshisha University, and Pak Sönmi of Tsukuba University. In China, mostly in Shanghai, I received assistance from Yun Zou, a PhD student at ANU, and Liuya Zhang of Fudan University to conduct research at the Shanghai Municipal Archives and historic sites, including the site of the Korean Provisional Government. I also want to express my sincere appreciation to the scholars in Europe who generously gave me their time and guided me in searching sources. I am especially grateful to Sonja Häussler of Stockholm University, Anders Riel Müller of the University of Copenhagen, Geir Helgesen of the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Andrew Jackson of the University of Copenhagen, Søren Launbjerg of the International People's College in Helsingør, Koen De Ceuster and Remco Breuker of Leiden University, Alain Delissen, Isabelle Sancho, and Valérie Gelézeau of L'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Florence Galmiche of Université Paris 7-Diderot, and Jong Chol An and You Jae Lee of the University of Tübingen.

During trips to the US to visit various archives, I was generously granted the time and assistance of archivists and librarians at Oregon State University, University of Southern California, University of Michigan, Columbia University, Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, Rockefeller Archive Center, Boston University, Harvard University, Vanderbilt University, and Wesleyan College. A sabbatical semester in the fall of 2017 gave me much needed time to concentrate on writing chapters. I was affiliated with Columbia University at that time, and I am especially grateful to Ted Hughes and Jungwon Kim for their generosity and friendship in making my sabbatical such an enjoyable and productive time.

At various stages of the current project, a number of research assistants helped me compile literature and identify sources: Alison Darby, Narah Lee, Yonjae Paik, Joowhee Lee, Younghye Suh, Bo Kyung Seo, Lee Hanbit, Liuya Zhang, and Malin Adolfsson. I thank them for their excellent work.

I also greatly benefited from the questions and comments from audiences when I presented elements of the research in this book at various institutions. For those opportunities, I would especially like to thank Ksenia Chizhova and Steven Chung of Princeton University, Jesook Song, Jennifer Chun, Judy Han, and Andre Schmid of the University of Toronto, Alison Bashford of the University of Cambridge, John Lie of UC-Berkeley, Jisoo Kim of George Washington University, Joe Cutter of Arizona State University, Jong Chol An and You Jae Lee of the University of Tübingen, Alain Delissen, Isabelle

Sancho, and Valérie Gelézeau of L'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Theodore Hughes and Jungwon Kim of Columbia University, Wonjung Min of Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Changzoo Song of Auckland University, Sunyoung Park and David Kang of the University of Southern California, Lawrence Wang of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Dafna Zur and Kären Wigen of Stanford University, Hyunjung Lee of Nanyang Technological University, Yunghee Kim of the University of Hawai'i, Ellen Widmer of Wellesley College, Daniel Bays of Calvin College, Sun Joo Kim of Harvard University, Heejin Lee of Yonsei University, and Nancy Abelmann of the University of Illinois. I would like to pay special homage to the late Daniel Bays and the late Nancy Abelmann, who were rare gems in academe for both their brilliance and generosity. I miss them dearly.

In thinking and writing about the book project, I have enormously benefited from working together with scholars across disciplinary and area specialization, which further stimulated my thinking about transnational perspectives. I am thankful for the opportunity to collaborate with Barbara Molony and Janet Theiss, with whom I coauthored the book *Gender in Modern East Asia: An Integrated History*. The experience was a gift in so many ways. I have also enjoyed the chance to engage in interregional dialogue at various conferences, and it has been my great delight to participate in conference panels with Ellen Widmer of Wellesley College, Stefan Hübner of the National University of Singapore, Paola Zamperini of Northwestern University, Gal Gvili of McGill University, Margaret Tillman of Purdue University, Jan Bardsley of the University of North Carolina, Rebecca Copeland of Washington University in St. Louis, Laura Prieto of Simmons University, Helen Schneider of Virginia Tech, Vera Mackie of the University of Wollongong, and Tsui Kai Hin Brian of Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

I would like to acknowledge that Chapter 1 is based on the earlier version that appeared first in the *Journal of Korean Studies* and Chapter 2 in the *Journal of Women's History*, both of which were significantly revised with additional analysis. I also thank various archives for giving me permission to use images in this book.

It has been such a joy to work with my editor, Lucy Rymer, who embraced my proposed book project from the outset and provided me with constant support and guidance at every stage. I have also been impressed by editorial team members, Emily Sharp, Natasha Whelan, Jayavel Radhakrishnan, Lauren Simpson, and Helen Baxter, at Cambridge University Press, who were always ready to answer questions and helped me navigate each stage toward publication. I would also like to express my deepest appreciation to the anonymous reviewers of my manuscript for insightful and constructive feedback that helped me clarify and elaborate my arguments.

I want to express special thanks to three friends and colleagues whose generosity and friendship have been crucial in completing the book. Robert Eskildsen has been a wonderful interlocutor in helping me develop and articulate research ideas, especially in relation to colonialisms. His incisive questions and comments, always peppered with humor, pushed me to go deeper. Our virtual “meetings” via Skype and our annual foodie outing to find the best restaurant in the host city of the AAS conference were precious occasions for stimulating dialogue and lots of laughter. Theodore Jun Yoo is a rare talent whose creativity, intellectual acuity, and endless energy inspire me in so many ways. He read my full book manuscript and offered incredibly helpful feedback that helped me reframe and improve my arguments. Tessa Morris-Suzuki, whose singular brilliance and generosity has enriched my intellectual and personal life from the time I arrived at ANU, has helped me in ways she is far too modest to take credit for. Our conversations at numerous seminars and conferences in Canberra, hikes around in Bateman’s Bay, and discovery walks through Seoul and Tokyo make up a significant part of the tapestry of my work and life.

In the long journey that makes up the writing of a book, it is vital to find small happinesses in everyday life to keep moving onward and put things in perspective. I have had the great good fortune to find a partner who helps me discover new delights in what happens day to day. As we enter our twenty-fifth year of marriage, I am reminded again of my exceptional luck in sharing a life with Dan. He is a constant source of happiness, nurture, and wisdom. Even magical words would not suffice to express enough my admiration and gratitude to him. Hugs and kisses will have to do.