

The Nationalist Critique of Female Double Suicide in Colonial Korea

*Leighanne Yuh**

*Claudia Soddu***

Introduction

During the colonial period, Korea experienced a high number of suicides, with more than 50,000 cases¹ (at least 30,000 mentions in newspapers and magazines of the time).² Among these, female suicides were numerous and often involved girls, many of whom were young brides trying to escape domestic violence at the hands of their husbands or mothers-in-law. Their deaths did not receive significant attention from the general public; however, suicides among the upper class and especially educated women, were rare and more publicized, sparking animated public discourse. This sense of involvement in the life and death of women was even more prominent when these suicides involved young women of child-bearing age, whose deaths could be collectively

* Associate Professor, Department of Korean History, Korea University

** MA Candidate, Department of Korean History, Korea University

1 Jun Yoo, Theodore. *It's Madness: the Politics of Mental Health in Colonial Korea*. Oakland (Calif.): University of California press. (2016): 121

2 Yum, Jennifer, "Suicide, "New Women," and Media Sensation in Colonial Korea" in *Transgression in Korea: Beyond Resistance and Control* edited by Juhn, Young Ahn, University of Michigan Press (2018): 106

perceived as a loss of an important human resource for the country rather than a personal loss that only concerned their families. This is the case of the young singer Yun Simdök, who committed suicide with her lover Kim Ujin on August 5th, 1926 after her career was ruined by malicious rumors. It is also the case of Hong Okim and Kim Yöngju, respectively twenty-one and nineteen-year-old women, who died on April 8th, 1931 by jumping in front of a train to escape from a society that would not accept their forbidden love. What these incidents had in common was not only the media firestorm they unleashed but they were both incidents of double love suicides involving upper-class women who had received a Western education. This article will examine why the media focus was on young, educated upper-class women and how the discourse about their suicides expanded beyond a moral cautionary tale and was coopted by the Korean nationalist movement.

Fueled by new ideas about modernity, nationalism, and constructions of Korean identity, the “New Woman” (*sin yösöng*) included different concepts and activities for women's rights between the 1920s and 1930s and incorporated nationalist, liberal, socialist and communist ideals. New Women were usually young, of relatively high social status, and received a ‘modern’ Western education like the aforementioned Yun Simdök, Hong Okim, and Kim Yöngju. However, with the loss of independence in 1910, the restoration of sovereignty for the Korean nationalist and independence movements became the most urgent priority and women were encouraged to receive an education that would equip them to become “wise mothers and good wives” who could then raise patriotic children.³ The suicides of Yun, Hong, and Kim represented a complete rejection of the Wise Mother, Good Wife role and their nationalist responsibilities. This paper examines female

3 Similar ideas had been circulating in Japan (the good wife, wise mother or *ryō-sei kenbo*) since the Meiji period and continued in colonial Korea since the Japanese wanted Korean women to produce good imperial subjects who would be productive members (e.g. workers).

suicide as part of competing discourses between the ‘free love’ movements, through which Korean female intellectuals attempted to claim autonomy over sex, marriage, and their love life, and the nationalist movement, which tried to define the Wise Mother, Good Wife as beneficial for the goal of national liberation. As women’s ambitions of free love and autonomy were frustrated by calls to fulfil their “national” childbearing duty, some of these women chose suicide instead of living in a society that condemned their choices. In the process of establishing the discursive hegemony of the Wise Mother, Good Wife ideal as the best possible model, women who committed suicide were criticized by male intellectuals as selfish, weak, and avoiding their civic responsibilities to bear and raise patriotic children.

The reaction of the general public to the suicides of young women between the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s was overwhelmingly negative. The articles published in newspapers like the *Tonga Ilbo* and the *Chosŏn Ilbo* depicted these suicides as acts of weak women who pursued a ‘selfish’ ideal of personal freedom rather than using their talents to serve the nation.⁴ In other words, the male writers of the major Korean newspapers and magazines denounced the suicides. Existing scholarship on this topic is limited and tends to engage with the “New Woman” as a monolithic group⁵ or focuses on the literature produced by newly educated women as a form of “resistance.”⁶ Recent scholarship on “non-normative sexuality and gender variance”

4 *Tonga Ilbo* (1926.8.9, 1926.8.14, 1931.4.16, 1931.4.21)

5 Choi, Hyaewol. ““Wise mother, good wife”: A transcultural discursive construct in modern Korea.” *Journal of Korean Studies* 14, no. 1 (2009): 1-33; Choi, Hyaewol. “Debating the Korean New Woman: Imagining Henrik Ibsen’s “Nora” in Colonial Era Korea.” *Asian Studies Review* 36, no. 1 (2012): 59-77.

6 Jooyeon, Rhee. ““ No Country for the New Woman”: Rethinking Gender and Cultural Nationalism in Colonial Korea Through Kim Myŏngsun.” *Acta Koreana* 17, no. 1 (2014): 399-427; Ha, Shin-ae. “FEMININITY UNDER THE WARTIME SYSTEM AND THE SYMPTOMACITY OF FEMALE SAME-SEX LOVE.” edited by *Jack Halberstam and Lisa Lowe*: 146.

in *Queer Korea* is a seminal project that engages with previously ignored and silenced discourses. This article contributes to this burgeoning scholarship by analyzing the way love suicide was framed in the national discourse, and analyzes the ideological conflict between the nationalist movement and some fringes of the women's movements. These specific cases of suicide, rather than being individual private acts, were acts of agency with their own discursive and ideological power. In order to delegitimize this discursive power, they were purposefully gendered and framed as anti-nationalistic, subordinating women's issues to the higher purpose of nationalistic ideology. As background, the first part of this paper discusses the way female suicide was framed during the Chosŏn Dynasty. The second part analyzes three different examples of female suicide during the Colonial Period and how they were perceived by the general public. The third part analyzes the way suicide was used as a discursive weapon during the Colonial Period and how its subversive value was superseded by the nationalistic discourse. Finally, this paper examines the response of the women's movements and explains the reasons behind their failure to counter nationalistic ideology.

The 'beautiful custom' of Chosŏn society

The practice of female suicide in Korean society was not a product of modernity. During the Chosŏn Dynasty, the 'beautiful custom' (*misok* 美俗) of women committing suicide after their husband's death in order to maintain their honor was praised as the ultimate exaltation of female virtue and chastity.⁷ The Neo-Confucian values enforced by Chosŏn elite families redefined the structure of family relationships,

7 Ko, Dorothy, Kim Haboush, JaHyun, and Piggott, Joan R. *Women and Confucian cultures in premodern China, Korea, and Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press (2003): 72

rigidly enforcing and distinguishing the roles of wives and concubines. This regulation of the husband-wife relationship ran parallel to the correlation between female virtue and chastity. The role of the woman (expressed by the distinction between primary wife and concubine) became pivotal to the perpetuation of family lineage, thus validating the social position and role of the male and the way women related to their husbands influenced the social standing of women. Applying the legitimacy theory, under which there could only be one sun in the sky, one king in the kingdom, and one head of the household to the family, women were socially pressured to have only one husband in their lifetime, to whom they owed loyalty for the entirety of their lives.⁸ On the one hand, chastity was constructed as a legislative tool to better control the lives of women, (e.g. by ensuring that the sons of remarried women could not enter public service)⁹ and on the other hand it became the unit of measure for female virtue. As these ideals of chastity and virtue were taken to the extreme, the ‘beautiful custom’ of following one’s husband even in death became the highest manifestation of honor for a childless widow. This kind of virtuous behavior was also encouraged by the state. Throughout the dynasty, the families of deceased virtuous women erected commemorative arches (*chōngp’yo* or *chōngmun*) to celebrate and display these examples of extraordinary morality. But, as Martina Deuchler suggests, these “beautiful suicides” also had an economic return, for the family of a suicidal widow could gain both a reputation for high moral standards and exemption from taxes and corvée labor. Therefore, one could easily assume that a childless widow could be pressured to take her own life by the same members of their own or their husband’s families.¹⁰

8 Han, Hee-sook. *Women’s Life during the Chosŏn Dynasty*. International Journal of Korean History Vol.6. (Dec. 2004): 124-25

9 Cho, Sung-Won. “Renaissance Nun Vs. Korean Gisaeng: Chastity and Female Celibacy in “Measure for Measure” and “Chun-hyang Jeon.”” *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no. 4 (2004): pp. 577. www.jstor.org/stable/40247450.

Female suicides were known to occur among upper-class families and yangban women practiced it to preserve their chastity and remain loyal to their (deceased) husband by remaining chaste widows. This was also a matter related to social status since yangban women needed to remain chaste to maintain their own yangban status and the status of their children.¹¹ As the number of suicides increased, this practice caused concern in the government, and debates over the issue of allowing childless widows to remarry increased during the second part of the Chosŏn Dynasty.¹² However, suicide was still considered a personal issue or a trivial matter that, compared with a public issue like the loss of chastity, could make an unchaste woman's son ineligible for a government post.¹³ This is different from the female suicides in the colonial period in the sense that although they were still treated as a public issue, the main concern was not the maintenance of yangban status but the shirking of one's nationalist responsibilities.

Love Suicide in Colonial Korea

With the opening of Korea in 1876, Confucian culture was challenged by new ideas about modernity through the newly opened trade routes. Chosŏn scholars, confronted with the military and political in-

10 Deuchler, Martina. "Propagating female virtues in Chosŏn Korea." In *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan* edited by Ko, Dorothy, Kim Haboush, JaHyun, and Piggott, Joan R. Berkeley: University of California Press (2003): 142-169.

11 Towards the end of the dynasty moral suicides had been recorded even in cases of commoners and slave women, together with other gory practices like self-mutilation undertaken in order to not lose chastity and honor. These changes can be read as a sure sign that Confucian behavioral norms had begun to be emulated by the lower classes. Ko, Kim Haboush, Piggott. Ibid: 72

12 Cho, Sung-Won. Ibid: 576-77

13 Kim, Yong-soon. *A History of Korean Women's Customs*. Seoul: Minum Sa (1989): pp. 191-192

feriority of their own country, were challenged with the task of filling the gaps between their Neo-Confucian culture and the Western ideas of modernity and to prove that Chosŏn could become a modern country. In this process, just like Chosŏn was scrutinized by ‘the eye of the other’ and found unsatisfactory, the figure of the “Chosŏn woman” as seen by Western travelers came to embody the inadequacy of the country itself. Percival Lowell, secretary of the first Korean delegation to the United States, said that Korean women “practically do not exist.”¹⁴ This kind of evaluation, although superficial and biased, was acutely perceived as a national shame by Korean intellectuals of the time, and the necessity to educate women stirred public debate as Western Christian missionaries opened the first female schools. The intensification of Japanese expansionist ambitions and their increasing interest in Chosŏn added further layers to the complex debate about womanhood in Korea, which was then influenced by both Korean and foreign intellectuals, though it was still a predominantly male discourse.

During this dynamic period of cultural change, women began to participate in these debates, demanding female rights not only in regards to education but also to labor, political participation, and sexual and romantic emancipation. Both the aforementioned double suicides of Yun Simdŏk and her wealthy lover Kim Ujin, and the double suicide of Hong Okim and Kim Yŏngju involved women who had received higher education. Yun Simdŏk (1897-1926) attended high school in Pyŏngyang and continued her studies in Seoul before she moved to Japan to study at the Tokyo Music Academy. In Japan she met Kim Ujin, a male student at Waseda University who would become, upon his return to Korea, a very influential playwright. The two met in 1921 and fell in love immediately, even though Kim Ujin was already married at the time. Until their deaths in 1926 they would have an on-again, off-again relationship.¹⁵ Yun Simdŏk is today considered the

14 Lowell, Percival. *Chosŏn, The Land of the Morning Calm: A Sketch of Korea*. Boston: Ticknor and Co (1888): 143

first soprano singer of Korea, but despite her success as a singer, which led to the release of her own songs and the participation in radio programs, her career was plagued by scandals regarding her personal life, especially allegations about having many lovers and even becoming the concubine of a tycoon.¹⁶ Despite the popularity of the last song she released, “Praise of Death”¹⁷ (released in 1925), she eventually committed suicide together with Kim Ujin on August 5th 1926 by jumping off of the Tokuju Maru, a passenger ferry en route from Shimonoseki to Pusan. Considering Yun had been fairly famous while alive both as a singer and for her scandalous private life, her death was highly sensationalized. Following the incident, the Yun-Kim suicide case, as it was labeled by the media, was the topic of multiple articles daily describing the circumstances of the event and exposing information about the personal lives of the lovers, with particular attention to Yun’s private life and status as a concubine. Moreover, Yun’s last song, ‘Glorification of Death,’ which was released only a few months before her suicide, fueled the media firestorm following her passing.

The criticism unleashed upon Yun was considerably harsher than her lover Kim. An article posted in the *Tonga Ilbo* on August 13th, a week after the accident, starts by saying:

“Rather than expressing judgement over whether the Yun-Kim double suicide is right or wrong, I would like to criticize Yun Sim-seok’s life as a woman.”¹⁸

15 Kawase Kinu, *Nonmun: Kim Ujin'gwa Yun Shimdögüi chuküm - Tangshi Ilbonüi chasalgwa nüro pon saeroun ch'üngmyöñ [Thesis: The Death of Kim U-jin and Yun Sim-deok - A new look into Colonial Japan's views on suicide]*, Nihon Gakuhö, Vol.4, 1997, pp.153

16 “Yun Sim-deok was a woman with many faults (...) that couldn’t have been accepted in any society. Among them one of the worst would be that she had become the concubine of Mr. OO.” *Tonga Ilbo*. (1926.08.13)

17 Also known as “Glorification of Death”

18 *Tonga Ilbo* (1926.08.13)

The article proceeded to analyze Yun's personal life, pointing out that as a concubine, her family life was shameful, which could have been reason enough for her to commit suicide.¹⁹ Not only was she a concubine, but while her lover was allegedly faithful to her, Yun is described as switching from one man to another before finally settling on Kim and leading him to his death.²⁰ Her past scandal and the mistakes she made during her career as a singer were also framed as possible reasons for her suicide, as the article points out that she felt ashamed of her shortcomings and could not accept the criticism she received.²¹

Although this was one of the harshest articles among those that criticized Yun in the aftermath of her death, it is important because it shows the manipulation of the narrative around her suicide. Yun's suicide could be seen an act of protest and defiance against a world that did not allow the pursuit of individual happiness. However, the *Tonga Ilbo* article frames Yun's suicide as an act of shame, and it is strongly implied that this shame stemmed from being unable to fulfil what should have traditionally been her role as a respectable Korean woman and female citizen. If one aspect was the criticism of Yun as a woman, the other was the criticism of Yun as a Korean. Yun was a famous singer, and she was considered to be Chosŏn's first soprano, so she had the potential to bring pride to her country through her talents.

19 "Yun Sim-deok was a woman with many faults (...) that couldn't have been accepted in any society. Among them one of the worst would be that she had become the concubine of Mr. OO (...) Since even Yun Sim-deok probably had a conscience, when she put her hands on her chest in the middle of the night and thought of her faults, she probably wanted to die." *Tonga Ilbo* (1926. 08.13)

20 "Yun and Kim were in love since eight years ago. But while it is true that Kim has never changed his affection for Yun until today, Yun has been falling into the arms of different men. After being unsatisfied with that life (...) she came back to her true love Kim U-jin. (...) However, even if Kim U-jin was satisfied with Yun who had come back, her conscience was probably not at peace." *Tonga Ilbo* (1926.08.13)

21 "She tried to wash away the swearing (...) but it did not stop, so she wanted to throw away the world." *Tonga Ilbo* (1926.08.13)

However, her death was considered selfish, and more than one article commented that by committing suicide for personal reasons she was setting a bad example to the young men and women of Chosŏn, and so should not be considered a fellow compatriot.²² Thus, Yun not only failed as a faithful wife, but she was unable to serve her country as a singer as well. Unsuccessful as a woman and a Korean left suicide as the only possible solution to escape her shortcomings.

Similarly, and just as negatively, was the assessment of the suicide of Hong Okim and Kim Yŏngju, who jumped in front of a Kyŏngin line train at Yŏngdŭngp'o Station in 1931. Hong Okim was a twenty-one-year-old student from *Ewha yŏja chŏnmun hakkyo* and came from a wealthy family. Kim Yŏngju, her nineteen-year-old companion, also hailed from a similar background and was married to an equally wealthy man. Hong left a suicide note to her father asking him to keep living a righteous path and to forgive her for her selfish act caused by the difficulties of living in such a futile world.²³ All the major newspapers in the country, including specialized women's magazines like *Sin Yŏsŏng*, covered the incident extensively with both the *Tonga Ilbo* and the *Chosŏn Ilbo* publishing over 20 articles each in just the two

22 "It is true that (...) there were many controversies regarding (her) behavior. However, I saw men and women working steadily only for Chosŏn while receiving more criticism and persecution than that. (...) If a young person in Chosŏn commits suicide due to such (selfish) reasons, half of the young people of Chosŏn will be punished. No, the young people of Chosŏn are not so weak. Rather than complaining, they need to strike back fiercely. (...) This case is big because it could lead to the young people of Chosŏn becoming weaker. (...) Young men and women of Chosŏn , (...) delete the names of these two people Yun and Kim from the list of people of this country." *Tonga Ilbo*, 'Expel them from the people of Chosŏn' (1926.8.9)

See also *Tonga Ilbo* (1926.08.13), where Yun is criticized for committing many mistakes as a singer and for being unable to accept the criticism, thus committing suicide out of shame instead of accepting the criticism to improve.

23 "Father, please forgive this daughter's unfilial behavior. I can't live in this dark emptiness anymore. I'll find another eternal world." *Sin Yŏsŏng* n.32 (May 1931)

weeks following the incident, many of which were comments based on letters submitted by readers. The attention this case received was such that not even a month after the incident the *Tonga Ilbo* had to announce they would not publish any other submissions on this topic as they had already received too many.²⁴

Although these deaths were further sensationalized because of very specific circumstances (for Yun it was the release of a song romanticizing death, while for Hong and Kim it was the suspicion of a same-sex love relationship), the public reaction was negative. Hong and Kim were extremely wealthy and educated young women of high social status, certainly more privileged than the majority of their peers, and the reason for their suicide caused confusion and sparked debates on different topics from mental health to criticism about nihilistic novels.

Some writers suggested mental illness as the cause of these girl's deaths.²⁵ The same assumptions had been made in the case of female, homosexual double suicides in Japan in the same period.²⁶ However, while Japanese psychiatrists and social critics directly linked the depression that led the women to suicide to homosexuality²⁷ and in-

24 “(This case) has received enough contributions from the readers to cover the mountains. Regarding the submissions, we will receive only up until now, so I will choose one last article to discuss.” *Tonga Ilbo* (1931.4.21)

25 “Cursing the emptiness of life (...) The main cause of death is the anxiety of intellectual women. *Tonga Ilbo* (1931.4.10; 1931.4.14)

“Recently, young men and women, because of immaturity and lack of skill (...) when they are distressed or when they are scolded, they cannot see things with a healthy mind.” *Chosŏn Ilbo* (1931.04.12)

“(At the time,) lawyer Lee In also argued that it is not the behavior of a healthy person.” *Chosŏn Ilbo* (1973.08.28)

“(Through this) we can get a glimpse at the fragile and weak hearts of women.” *Tonga Ilbo* (1931.4.21)

26 Robertson, Jennifer. “Dying to Tell: Sexuality and Suicide in Imperial Japan.” *Signs* 25, no. 1 (1999): 1–35.

27 Tamura 1913; *Shojo no hi no sei mondai* 1934; Fukushima [1935] 1984, 562, as cited in Robertson, 1999

directly acknowledged the practice of lesbian love even as they labeled it as a form of sexual deviancy, the narrative around the Hong/Kim suicide was more focused on the criticism of their identity as intellectual women. Even in the articles that explicitly mention “same sex love,”²⁸ the usage of the term is for sensationalistic purposes and there is an intentional lack of discussion of same sex love and homosexual practices in the articles. This absence signals a reluctance to acknowledge the two women’s lesbian lifestyle.

Criticism escalated into a rebuke of intellectual or educated women and not a denunciation of lesbianism. Commenters blamed Hong and Kim for their dissolute lives, bemoaning the modern custom of getting male lovers that ruined young girls and criticizing the loss of family values that would cause the eventual ruin of society as a whole.²⁹ The media honed in on the notion of free love (not lesbian love) in their criticism, describing it as selfish and indulgent. Choosing not to marry and loving whomever they wanted was a manifestation of personal desire and individual pleasure. If women chose not to marry then they would not bear children, which was also selfish and undermined the traditional family. Moreover, free love, choosing not to marry, and not having children was not only antithetical to the “Wise Mother, Good Wife” ideal but could potentially undermine the entire nationalist movement. Without women bearing children and increasing the population, how could the Korean nation survive? It was this subversive aspect that was most dangerous to the Korean nationalist agenda.

Most of the commentaries focused on the shallowness of the suicides, highlighting the comparatively privileged lives these women were living especially when confronted with the hardships the people in the lower class had to face under the colonial government.³⁰ Implicitly,

28 See, previously quoted: Tonga Ilbo, ‘Homosexual railway suicide’ (1931.4.10)

29 Yi Kap-su, “Sōng kyoyuk e taehaya [Regarding sex education,]” *Ch’ōngnyōn* (Feb. 1931): 8-11

30 “Let’s look at the cause of death in a rational way. They had access to new

unlike lower class women who needed to work to survive, upper class women did not need to work and their only responsibility was to marry and raise a family; refusing to fulfill this duty meant shirking their primary responsibility. Some of the criticism focused on the act of suicide as liberation from an unwanted life, seeing it as a useless act.³¹ This position is shown very clearly in a long piece published by the *Tonga Ilbo* on April 22, 1931 that analyzes the causes of the Hong/Kim suicide. In the article, 'unwanted marriage' was identified as the cause of the suicide. However, the author points out that having a good marriage is not the only important thing in a woman's life, and that there are other things women can do. While the article does not elaborate further in what these possibilities in a woman's life could be, it also states that 'knowledge, good clothes, and having their belly full' are also not enough reasons to live, since both these women had them all. Considering the age of the women involved, the other responsibility in a woman's life that the article hints at is childbearing. The strong implication of this criticism is that, although these women could not be Good Wives, they should have fulfilled their duty as Wise Mothers. This shows a change of opinion from the case of Yun Simdök's suicide, when she was criticized for her inability to fulfil her duty as a wife. In Hong and Kim's cases, marriage does not seem to be the peak of a woman's fulfilment as much as childbearing. While the homosexuality of the two girls was again not mentioned directly in

knowledge and as daughters of prestigious families they lived an abundant life. (...) Yet, not even knowledge, silk clothes, and having a full belly (...) can be for them a requirement to live. Judging by their suicide note, their life was still empty and left them longing." *Tonga Ilbo* (1931.04.22)

- 31 "The cause of (their) suicide seems to be tied to marriage problems and dissatisfaction with their marriage. If it is true, I express my sympathy as it is a problem that most of the young men and women of Choseon are suffering. However, (...) marriage is not everything in a "person's life." (...) There are a lot of other things that a woman can do instead of letting everything go 'in vain'." *Tonga Ilbo* (1931.04.22)

this article, the position of the author that women should fulfil their duty as mothers even when they cannot be good wives is an indirect condemnation to the lesbian lifestyle that eschews the role of the woman as a child bearer. However, instead of criticizing homosexuality directly, the author denounces an inappropriate heterosexual behavior (being unable to be a good wife) and suggests an appropriate heterosexual behavior (being a wise mother), reinforcing heteronormativity. At the same time, refusing to acknowledge homosexuality directly can also be seen as a way to deny its existence, especially at a time when the concepts of appropriate and deviant sexuality were being constructed under the pressure of different structures of power (Todd, 2020). Whether it was the colonial authorities, the nationalist movement, the conservative Confucianists or the “progressive” women movements, homosexuality had the subversive ability to destabilize gender and power relations,³² even more so when existing powers competed for supremacy. Thus, while in Japan homosexuality was discussed and problematized, in Colonial Korea it was erased from the public discourse and funneled criticism squarely on the faults of intellectual women, becoming a cautionary tale to encourage “appropriate” female behavior.

Additionally, the aforementioned articles on the Yun case and the Hong/Kim case show that the acts of these young women are described as weak, selfish, and meaningless and are often presented in strong contradistinction to the courage that Chosŏn youth needed to show³³ or to the harsh situation other young persons in Chosŏn were facing³⁴. By comparing weak women who committed suicide with the

32 Cha Min Jung, “1920~30nyŏndae ‘sŏnggwahak’ tamnon’gwa ‘isŏngae kyubŏmsŏng’ui t’ansaeng [A Study on the Sexology and the Construction of ‘Heterosexuality’ in the Colonized Korea 1920~ 1930]”, *Yŏksawa Munhwa no.22*, (2011): pp. 29-52

33 See, previously quoted: Tonga Ilbo, ‘Expel them from the people of Chosŏn’ (1926.8.9)

34 See, previously quoted: “(...) most of the young men and women of Chosŏn are

other “young men and women of Chosŏn,”³⁵ the authors highlighted their shortcomings as Koreans and implied that, compared to the other young people, they lacked patriotic feeling. Even in the articles that sympathize with the victims, their suicide is still represented negatively due to their abandonment of their nationalist duties to their country.³⁶

The analysis of the strong criticism the Yun/Kim and Hong/Kim suicides received from the public opinion shows some important findings. First, the suicide of young women was a waste of resources and opportunity to fulfill their obligations as Korean nationalist women. This was because their fulfilment of their duty was tied to their ability to bear patriotic children and support their nationalist husbands. Second, the ability to bear a child is seen as a value for the nationalist cause. The strong criticism was motivated by the fact that by committing suicide, these women were depriving the country of important human resources. Thus, they were failing to fulfil their duty as citizens, specifically as female Korean nationalists. Third, the reason behind these suicides belonged to the private sphere, but since childbearing had a public value of creating human resources for the country, the loss that resulted from the suicide of a young woman is perceived as a public loss. Finally, homosexuality was a threat to the role of women as wives and mothers; but rather than being problematized as such, it was excluded from the public discourse, and the result of this exclusion exacerbated criticism against intellectual women and reinforced heteronormativity.

The conflict that emerges through the analysis of the newspaper articles is that the authors of the articles, who were mostly educated

suffering.” Tonga Ilbo (1931.04.22)

35 In Korean, [Chosŏn chŏngnyŏn namnyŏ] (조선 청년 남녀). This expression was used in more than one article for both the Yun/Kim and Hong/Kim case.

36 “Should (we) fulfil (our) obligation to society and fight until the end, or should the young men and women abandon the troubled reality of Chosŏn?” Tonga Ilbo (1931.04.21)

men, saw the loss of lives that could have helped the national cause as selfish and unpatriotic because these women failed to carry out their responsibility as Wise Mothers. This analysis delineates a strong conflict between the ideals of national liberation and individual liberation, specifically women's liberation. For the women who committed suicide, their death was a liberation in itself, because it was a way to break free from an unwanted life, but their choice was criticized because national liberation should have taken priority over individual (or women's) liberation.

In addition to their connection to the national cause, these specific suicides received much attention among the general public because the women involved could be linked with the concept of the 'Modern Girl.' The reason did not only lie in these women's background, but in a broader critical position against the new ideals of modernity connected with womanhood. The idea of the Modern Girl, which was introduced in Korea from Japan, briefly had a positive connotation in the beginning as it was used to indicate women who had received a 'modern' Western education.³⁷ As Korean intellectuals attempted to appropriate the ideas of modernity during the early phases of the colonial period, educated women became a symbol of that coveted modernity. However, under colonial domination, the attitude of intellectuals towards modernity became increasingly conflicted, and the Modern Girls came to embody this conflict. The way Modern Girls expressed their relationship with modernity was through the consumption of modernity itself, which was available to them in the form of Western products. Therefore, the image of the Modern Girl that became popularized during the late Twenties and into the Thirties evolved into that of a frivolous young woman who paid attention to foreign fashion and luxury

37 Shin Yeosong, June 1925, 38-39 in: Rhee Jooyeon, "NO COUNTRY FOR THE NEW WOMAN": *RETHINKING GENDER AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM IN COLONIAL KOREA THROUGH KIM MYŎNGSUN*, Acta Koreana 17, no.1 (2014): pp. 406.

brands. As Hyun (2013) points out, the figure of the Modern Girl wasn't exclusive to Korea, but was used to define young women in China and Japan as well. However, in a country like Korea where national identity was already facing annihilation due to colonial domination, Western modernity became another potential source of contamination of the national identity, thus causing the male dominated intellectual world to take a very negative stance towards Modern Girls.³⁸

The emphasis on the 'passive consumption of foreign goods' was clearly perceived as negative for the nationalist cause, even more so when the trade of foreign goods was controlled by Japanese entrepreneurs.³⁹ However, the idea that Korean women were spending money for imported goods did not only have economic implications. By spending money for themselves instead of frugally saving like proper Good Wives and Wise Mothers, they were putting their personal needs ahead of the collective needs of their family. The display of selfishness of Modern Girls and the way they put their own personal desires over the role of Wise Mother, Good Wife are the same reasons behind the strong criticism of female suicides in the same period. The display of individualism was considered a threat to the survival of the Korean nation and national liberation.

While the outrage was particularly violent in the case of the death of young women or 'Modern Girls,' the circumstances and the *modus operandi* of female suicide had changed at every level of the society. Although they never received the attention suicides of upper-class women, most of the female suicides in Colonial Korea had, in their own way, a subversive potential. The suicide victims among lower-class women were often young women or girls, who did so in order to escape a life of abuse at the hands of their husband or their in-laws.⁴⁰

38 Jeong Min, H., "New Women and Modern Girls: consuming foreign goods in colonial Seoul," *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, Vol. 5 No. 4, (2013) pp. 497-498.

39 Jeong Min, H., (2013), pp. 501-502.

In Colonial Korea the custom of arranged marriage was still the norm, and many girls married at a very young age. But compared to late Chosŏn society when women committed suicide to preserve their honor and chastity after their husband's death, colonial period suicides among the lower-class occurred when the husband was still alive and sometimes even before consummation in order to escape an arranged marriage. Although often ignored by the public discourse, they were as much a manifestation of the changes in gender roles and the concept of womanhood and marriage as the suicides of the 'New Women' Yun, Hong and Kim were.

Female suicide between nationalism and feminism

Examining the changes in the reasons for suicide from the Chosŏn Dynasty until the colonial period reveals how the motivations of young women changed since the opening of the ports. While Chosŏn women's suicides conformed to Confucian ideology, colonial women's suicides were the result of their resistance to ruling ideology and the sign of a deep malaise caused by intense feelings of disconnection. It is emblematic that despite their willingness to perform a radical act like suicide, their agency was never acknowledged. Instead, male intellectuals who commented on the suicides created a narrative of passive and weak women unable to stand the weight of modernity and fulfil their nationalist role as Korean women. Whether it was the act of a young bride seeking to escape an unhappy marriage or a student running away with her lover, these suicides show the ideological fragility of colonial Korea, pressured by Western modernity and Japanese rule. The fissures in Confucian hegemony became sites of struggle, ideological grey areas where different ideas could confront and challenge the ruling ideology.

40 Yum, Jennifer, Ibid: 105-106

In this process of negotiation, female suicides were a very powerful discursive weapon the feminist movements could use for validation. Although the singular acts and personal motivations of Yun, Kim, Hong, and other young women who committed suicide were not inherently political or intended to make a political statement, the analysis of the causes of their deaths were contextualized within a political discourse and bound to have political consequences. The malaise that led women to commit suicide was a social one connected to a series of hegemonic values (family, womanhood, motherhood), and women's unwillingness to commit to them (expressed through suicide) was a direct challenge to those values as well. However, it was the Korean nationalist movement that ideologically opposed the rise of female movements. As women began to challenge the hegemonic systems and ideologies, the most cohesive oppositional ideology was nationalism; thus on the discursive level these issues were framed in nationalistic terms and concepts. Unlike the nationalist movement, movements related to women were fractured and did not have a common goal. While some female intellectuals advocated for free love, others demanded more education for women, and still others looked to communist ideology to achieve gender equality. However, none of these ever achieved much traction and eventually were subsumed under the aegis of nationalism.

The Korean nationalist movement was born initially as a form of resistance against foreign imperialism, and specifically Japanese imperialism during the colonial rule. The main and most pressing goal of nationalist intellectuals was, naturally, the liberation of the country, and every other goal was to be subordinated to it. However, in order for this goal to be achieved, participation was required on a mass level. Feminist movements, which only existed on behalf of a portion of the population, were not only detrimental to the nationalist cause because they could draw attention away from it, they also had an inherent potential of social disruption and conflict. By attacking the institutions of family and the ideals of womanhood, female movements were bound

to destabilize society, making it even more difficult to achieve the social unity necessary to overthrow Japanese rule and achieve independence.

From this perspective, it is easy to understand the overwhelming criticism of the suicides of Yun, Hong, and Kim, and the way writers and intellectuals were able to link them to the New Women movement. By calling out the incompatibility of suicide with the national cause, they were trying to limit its subversive potential. Also, by associating suicide with the New Woman, they could weaken a source of potential ideological opposition by introducing an element of class and gender in their discourse. New Women were rich and educated and enjoyed privileges the rest of the country did not have. Framing their social discomfort as the shallow and frivolous whims of rich girls in opposition to the hardships of hard-working Korean laborers strategically isolated the issues New Women were promoting as something unnecessary and oppositional to the progress of all Korean women.

It is notable that despite the equally high numbers of suicides among the lower-class – a clear call of distress the women of the country were sending – lower-class suicides seldom made the front pages of the newspaper and intellectuals did not acknowledge those numbers or the need to reform the custom of arranged marriages and the effect of strict patriarchal rules on young brides. By selectively discussing a specific type of suicide, a problem that was endemic and influenced the entire country was thus confined to the movement of New Women and problematized in a negative way.

But what about the response of the women's movements in Korea? Certainly, as the numbers related to female suicides show, social reforms were necessary and these could have catalyzed an expansion of women's rights. While acknowledging the efficacy of the nationalist propaganda aiming to frame female suicides in a negative way, it is important to address the lack of resistance from women's movements. It is emblematic that even among the articles that actively acknowledged women's problems as social problems of the country and argued for an improvement of women's lives, the majority of the writers were

men. This is related to the low rates of female education in colonial Korea, where in the late 1930s only 16% of women received a formal education (Kimura 1993: 642). However, to properly understand the lack of presence, or more accurately the lack of incisiveness of female writers and more specifically of ‘New Women’ writers during this time period, we must examine the New Woman’s ideology and the first women’s movements.⁴¹

The missionary teacher Alice Appenzeller described⁴² *Sin Yōja* (New Woman) the first magazine “that women can call their own” and was founded in 1920 by one of the leaders of the women’s movements in Korea, Kim Wōnju. *Sin Yōja* was a call for the liberation and emancipation of Korean women, and although the publisher was male, the magazine was written and produced by women. After *Sin Yōja*, more magazines produced by women, together with magazines targeting a female audience, were published and more than 450 female associations with different political orientations and goals were founded during the decade. Women started to speak up and petition for social reform, self-awareness, and emotional, legal and economic independence. Despite the increase in female activism, by the mid-1920s the presence of women in the public discourse of female suicides was extremely limited.

The absence of women from this discourse is largely due to the disjointed and disparate nature of the different women’s movements. First, there was never a single woman’s movement but many movements with different political directions and different, often opposing, goals. Historians generally divide the “New Women” into macro-categories,

41 The real kick starter of the rise of women’s movements in Korea during the 1920s was the relative freedom of speech allowed by the colonial authorities after the 1st March movement in 1919. The Cultural Policy the Japanese adopted to avoid international backlash after the harsh repression of 1919 allowed both the women’s movements (and to a limited extent the nationalist movements) to find a platform.

42 Appenzeller, Alice Martina. (1920)

which in return are comprised of different groups. Kim Keong-il divides New Women in two macro-groups, one affiliated with liberalism, including the aforementioned Kim Wŏnju, Na Hyesŏk, Kim Myŏngsun and Yun Shimdŏng, and the group affiliated with socialists, whose major exponents were, among others, U Bongun, Yu Yŏngjun, and Chŏng Ch'ilsŏng.⁴³ Choi Hyaeweol divides New Women into liberal feminist groups, Christian women's organizations, and socialist organizations, finding instead three macro-categories (although the line between liberal feminists and Christian women was often blurred).⁴⁴

By looking at the composition of the main groups included under the umbrella term 'New Women,' it is clear that the fragmentation weakened the movement as a whole since more groups meant that each separate group was politically weaker, and contributed to a lack of unity in political goals. Liberal groups were more likely to support pro-feminist activities including the female right to self-determination, free love, sex, and marriage. Christian groups had a similar goal but emphasized the role of women based on Christian values. On the contrary, socialist groups, who were connected with the movements of 'proletarian women' and 'labor women' (respectively *musan buin* and *nodong buin*),⁴⁵ were more concerned with the participation of women in the labor market and improvements for female workers.

Clearly, while the association and groups inspired by socialism had a practical goal that could be shared by a majority of the female population in Korea, liberal feminist women represented a privileged minority, and this inability to connect with a bigger audience greatly limited their political influence. Moreover, liberal feminist associations were not only weakened by the ridge between themselves and socialist

43 Kim, Keong-il. *Shinyŏsyŏng kaenyŏmgwa yŏksa [New Woman, Ideals and History]*. Seoul: P'urŏnyŏksa (2016): 19

44 Choi, Hyaeweol. *New women in colonial Korea: a sourcebook*. London: Routledge (2013)

45 Kim Keong-il, *Ibid.*

associations but also plagued by internal fragmentation such as diverging progressive and conservative positions that directly supported the nationalistic agenda. The internal conflict undermined their ability to unite towards a common goal and to formulate a consistent defense to male-centered nationalist propaganda. In particular, the attempts to frame New Women as frivolous and shallow and to condemn their activism as a hollow imitation of Western women's movements and ideals were implicitly accepted by some fringes of the women's movements themselves.

In regards to female suicides, the lack of response from the women's movements, and in particular the liberal feminist movement, can be seen as a result of their small numbers, internal fragmentation, and subsequent political weakness. But it is also important to recognize that through their political actions, liberal New Women targeted the intellectual male world and never engaged with the uneducated majority of lower-class women. As we saw before in the analysis of suicide among lower-class women, women of all social statuses could agree on many of the most important demands of the liberal women's movement (such as the reform of family and marriage) thereby strengthening the political position of liberal women's movements. However, liberal New Women with their Western school uniforms, bobbed hair, and petitions for self-awareness and self-liberation, acted inside their own bubble and hardly connected with the needs and demands of the rest of the Korean female population.

Conclusion

The ideological struggle between the New Women and nationalism in colonial Korea eventually resulted in the degradation of the New Woman and the construction of a new paradigm of women by nationalist intellectuals such as Yi Kwangsu. Influenced by the ideology of the good wife, wise mother that had aided the nationalist and im-

perialist project in Japan, Korean nationalists defined the proper Korean woman as ready to subordinate her selfish wishes to the higher nationalist cause. In order to do so, she would have to become the wife and the mother of the country, protecting the family as the basic unit of the nation.

Although we cannot ignore the connection between the historical circumstances of colonial rule and the nationalist movements' criticism of women's movements, it is also necessary to examine the role of Korean cultural values. In the construction of its ideology, the Korean nationalist movement drew from Chosŏn-era Neo-Confucian values - ironically, the same values that female suicides could potentially subvert - but redrafted them in a new nationalistic form and used them to marginalize and minimize the subversive discursive power of female suicides and women's movements. On the other hand, women's movements around the country failed to organize themselves at a national level and connect with the demands of the lower strata of the population, remaining a phenomenon limited to the parlors of the few educated girls who were capable of participating in the discourse on female rights.

Female suicide was one of the many battlefields between the nationalist and the feminist movements during the colonial period. As an issue involving women at every level of society, it had the potential to challenge the old Confucian system and bring to light the new needs of Korean women. However, as this analysis has shown, despite the passage of time, and the dramatic changes Korean women experienced, female suicide was considered a personal and trivial matter compared with the public issue of national liberation. The rise of women's movements in Korea, fueled by a small clique of educated women, was ultimately subsumed by the nationalist movement and relegated to the realm of the private and inconsequential.

Bibliography

1. Chosŏn Ilbo (1973.08.28)
2. Sin Yŏsŏng n.32 (May 1931)
3. Tonga Ilbo (1926.8.9, 1926.8.14, 1931.4.10; 1931.4.14, 1931.4.16, 1931.4.21)
4. Cha, Min Jung, “1920~30nyŏndae ‘sŏnggwahak’ tamnon'gwa ‘isŏngae kyubŏmsŏng’ŭi t'ansaeng [A Study on the Sexology and the Construction of ‘Heterosexuality’ in the Colonized Korea 1920~1930].” *Yŏksawa Munhwa*, no.22 (2011): pp. 29-52
5. Cho, Sung-Won. “Renaissance Nun Vs. Korean Gisaeng: Chastity and Female Celibacy in "Measure for Measure" and "Chun-hyang Jeon.” *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no. 4 (2004)
6. Choi, Hyaeweol. "Debating the Korean New Woman: Imagining Henrik Ibsen's “Nora” in Colonial Era Korea." *Asian Studies Review* 36, no. 1 (2012)
7. Choi, Hyaeweol. *New women in colonial Korea: a sourcebook*. London: Routledge (2013)
8. Choi, Hyaeweol. ““Wise mother, good wife”: A transcultural discursive construct in modern Korea." *Journal of Korean Studies* 14, no. 1 (2009)
9. Han, Hee-sook. “Women’s Life during the Chosŏn Dynasty”. *International Journal of Korean History* Vol.6. (Dec. 2004)
10. Jeong Min, H., “New Women and Modern Girls: consuming foreign goods in colonial Seoul,” *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, Vol. 5 No. 4, (2013)
11. Juhn, Young Ahn. *Transgression in Korea: Beyond Resistance and Control*. University of Michigan Press (2018)
12. Kim, Yong-soon. *A History of Korean Women's Customs*. Seoul: Minum Sa (1989)
13. Kim, Keong-il. *Shinyŏsyŏng kaenyŏmgwa yŏksa [New Woman, Ideals and History]*. Seoul: P'urŏnyŏksa (2016)
14. Ko, Dorothy, Kim Haboush, JaHyun, and Piggott, Joan R. *Women*

- and Confucian cultures in premodern China, Korea, and Japan.* Berkeley: University of California Press (2003)
15. Lowell, Percival. *Chosŏn, The Land of the Morning Calm: A Sketch of Korea.* Boston: Ticknor and Co (1888)
 16. Robertson, Jennifer. "Dying to Tell: Sexuality and Suicide in Imperial Japan." *Signs* 25, no. 1 (1999)
 17. Rhee Jooyeon, "'NO COUNTRY FOR THE NEW WOMAN': RETHINKING GENDER AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM IN COLONIAL KOREA THROUGH KIM MYŎNGSUN", *Acta Koreana* 17, no.1 (2014)
 18. Todd, Henry A., *Queer Korea.* Durham: Duke University Press (2020)
 19. Yi, Kap-su, "Sŏng kyoyuk e taehaya [Regarding sex education]." *Ch'ŏngnyŏn* (Feb. 1931)
 20. Yoo, Theodore Jun. *The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea: Education, Labor, and Health, 1910–1945.* Oakland (Calif.): University of California Press (2008)
 21. Yoo, Theodore Jun. *It's Madness: the Politics of Mental Health in Colonial Korea.* Oakland (Calif.): University of California press. (2016)

<Abstract>

The Nationalist Critique of Female Double Suicide in Colonial Korea

Leighanne Yuh

Claudia Soddu

During the colonial period, the double love suicides of young “new women” were sensationalized by media outlets and became the object of discussion at a national level, triggering discourse over the role and value of women in Colonial Korea. This sense of involvement in the life and death of women was even more prominent when these suicides involved young women of child-bearing age, whose deaths could be collectively perceived as a loss of an important human resource for the country. This article will examine why the media focus was on young, educated upper-class women and how the discourse about their suicides expanded beyond a moral cautionary tale and was coopted by the Korean nationalist movement. We analyze the discourse that followed two representative female double suicides, the Yun/Kim suicide of 1926, and the Hong/Kim homosexual double suicide of 1931, focusing on the critique published mainly in the *Tonga Ilbo* newspaper. We also examine the response of the feminist movements, or lack thereof, and the development of the ideological conflict between feminist and nationalist movements.

Female suicide was one of the many battlefields between the nationalist and the feminist movements during the colonial period. As an issue involving women at every level of society, it had the potential to challenge the Confucian patriarchal system and bring to light the new

needs of Korean women. However, as this analysis has shown, it was dismissed as a personal and trivial matter compared with the urgent public issue of national liberation. The rise of women's movements in Korea, fueled by a small clique of educated women, was ultimately subsumed by the nationalist movement and relegated to the realm of the private and inconsequential.

Keywords: Colonial Korea, women's history, queer history, nationalism, women's movements, New Women, Wise Mother Good Wife

〈국문초록〉

일제시기 여성 동반 자살에 대한 민족주의적 논평

리안 유(고려대학교 한국사학과 교수)

클라우디아 소두(고려대학교 한국사학과 석사수료)

일제시기 젊은 “신여성”의 동반자살이 언론 매체에 의해 선정적으로 다뤄지면서, 민족 단위의 논의 대상이 됨과 동시에 일제하 조선에서 여성의 역할과 가치에 대한 담론을 촉발하였다. 여성의 생사에 대한 몰입감은 가임 여성의 자살에 연관되었을 때 더욱 더 드러났으며, 해당 여성의 죽음은 모두에게 국가적 인적 자원의 중대한 손실로 받아들여졌다. 본 논문은 왜 언론매체가 젊고 교육받은 상류층 여성에 주목하였으며, 이러한 여성의 자살이 교훈적 이야기를 넘어 조선의 민족주의 운동에까지 끌어들이졌는지를 검토하였다. 이를 위해 두 건의 대표적인 여성동반자살, 곧 1926년 사례와 1931년 사례에서 동아일보에 실린 논평에 나타난 논의를 분석하였다. 이어 여성주의 운동 계열의 반응 또는 무반응을 살피고, 여성주의 운동 계열과 민족주의 운동 계열 사이의 이념적 대립 양상도 검토하였다.

여성의 자살은 일제시기 민족주의와 여성주의 운동 계열 간의 여러 전장 중 하나였다. 사회 각 층의 여성이 연루된 문제로서, 이는 유교적 가부장적 체제에 도전하고 조선 여성의 새로운 요구를 비출 잠재력이 있는 문제였다. 그러나, 본 논문의 분석에서 드러난 바와 같이, 이 문제는 민족 해방의 긴급하고 공적인 문제와 달리 개인적이고 사소한 문제로 치부되었다. 일제하 조선에서 여성 운동의 흥기는 소수의 교육받은 여성 집단에 의해 자극되었으나, 중국에는 민족주의 운동에 포섭되어 사적이고 대수롭지 않은 문제의 영역으로 격하되었다.

주제어: 식민지 조선, 여성사, 퀴어사, 민족주의, 여성운동, 신여성, 현모양처

