

## **Honors Thesis Proposal**

### **The War on Gender Equality: Feminism and Anti-Feminism in South Korea**

#### **I . Project Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to better understand the feminist and anti-feminist divide in South Korea. In this thesis I will analyze reasons for South Korea's gender division by looking into Korea's history of Confucianism and patriarchal society. I will further analyze the present-day gender division that is happening in South Korea (hereafter Korea). I will examine and analyze why both feminists and anti-feminists identify with these movements. Overall, while researching and writing this thesis I want to lay out both sides of the feminism versus anti-feminism divide and what these movements could mean for the future of Korea. I am observing that Koreans are trying to uproot the cultural norm of sexism because of their cultural value of equality.

#### **II . Project Importance:**

As a Korean major who has been studying the Korean language and culture for the past three years I have been monitoring the recent presidential elections in Korea. I noticed that both of the presidential candidates had been campaigning in favor of certain gender movements. I have also recently taken a Korean culture class where the topic of gender in Korean culture and the two major groups and movements in South Korea was discussed .

Since the time of Confucianism and other patriarchal systems in South Korea, there has been distinct differences between male and female experiences and roles in various aspects of Korean life, such as in education or social life. The gendered history of this country has led to the

gap between the two genders to persist to today as both genders struggle for equality and representation. Both sides feel like they are being discriminated against in some way. This struggle has led to two major groups being formed Korea: feminists and anti-feminists. In the recent presidential election in South Korea both of the male candidates took advantage of the current tension between the gender movements and tried to favor the anti-feminists. Particularly President-elect, Yoon Seok-yol, who utilized the concerns many Korean men have about reverse discrimination and how the government is handling gender equality. Yoon doubled down on his support of the anti-feminists by blaming the feminist movement for the decreasing birth rate and spoke out against the #MeToo movement.<sup>1</sup> The #MeToo movement in Korea was a key turning point in the feminist movement. While the #MeToo movement was taking off in other parts of the world, due to the social conservatism and the history of women being mocked for bringing up the gender inequality that has been plaguing the country, it remained relatively silent in the Korean peninsula. After the allegations of sexual abuse and harassment came out about famous men in Korean society, the #MeToo movement finally took off.<sup>2</sup> With the current war between the gender movements being politicized and taking over social media, I thought that it would be important to break down why there are these two opposing groups and examine how historical and cultural factors may help to understand what each group (the feminists and anti-feminists) are proposing and why.

### **III. Methods:**

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<sup>1</sup> Draudt, Darcie. "The South Korean Election's Gender Conflict and the Future of Women Voters." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 8 Feb. 2022, [www.cfr.org/blog/south-korean-elections-gender-conflict-and-future-women-voters](http://www.cfr.org/blog/south-korean-elections-gender-conflict-and-future-women-voters). Accessed 12 Mar. 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Sample, Mark. "#MeToo Movement in South Korea." *Asia Society*, [asiasociety.org/korea/metoo-movement-south-korea](http://asiasociety.org/korea/metoo-movement-south-korea). Accessed 8 May 2022.

I first plan to research Confucianism and the history of the Korean patriarchal structure to understand how the current gap between genders in Korea was affected by these factors from the past. I will also research what feminists are aguring for and why, and then examine the anti-feminist group. Because of the recency of the development of the anti-feminist movement in Korea, we know less about the origins and characteristics of this movement.

#### **IV. Project Overview:**

Despite miraculous economic, educational and technological development, the gender equality gap in South Korea is among the largest in the world. Korean feminists argue that one reason for this divide is due to South Korea's history of Confucianism. The role of Korean women compared to men is illustrated in the *Song of Five Relationships* by Chu Sebung. This text teaches the five traditional values that are the basis of Confucian moral standards. The relationship between men and women are highlighted in this text as specifically the relationship (otherwise known as pubuyubyŏl) between a husband and their wife. In the translated text it states,

“The wife goes to the place in the fields where her husband works, bringing him a tray of food. Though they eat together. She looks him not in the eyes. As a friend to be appreciated, should the husband be venerated less than an honored guest?”  
(Chu)<sup>3</sup>.

Derived from this passage alone many feminists see this as a time where women were treated as lesser than their husbands. Their argument for Confucianism being the main reason for gender inequality is because the effects of Confucianism are still ingrained within Korean culture

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<sup>3</sup> Chu, Sebung. *The Song of Five Relationships*. Compiled by Jieun Kiaer and Anna Yates-Lu, translated by Jieun Kiaer, Routledge, 2019.

and society in the present day.<sup>4</sup> Though not as severe as when Confucianism was practiced throughout the country, the echoes of these Confucian moral standards are witnessed in certain Korean traditions and practices, especially in relation to Koreans families and gender roles.

Another, more recently talked about reason for the gender inequality in Korea is Korea's historically hierarchical and patriarchal social system that remains ingrained within Korean society. Despite gains in female educational attainment and occupational representation, gender gaps in Korean society are the largest among high-income nations.<sup>5</sup> In patriarchal systems men have power over other members of their family. Fathers are considered superior to female family members, but so too are any males in the family ranging from the great grandfather to the first son and other sons. In 1953 the *hoju* system was introduced to Korean society which was a law that all family members register under "the family head" which made the eldest male in the household the head of the family. Under this system daughters become members of their husbands' families when they marry and the only way to inherit the family head position is if every male in the family dies. This system was not abolished until 2008.<sup>6</sup> The abolishment of this system was a huge win for feminists but it is important to note that 2008 was less than 15 years ago. A system that was so established in Korean society that it was only just recently abolished. Something so deeply rooted into society does not just go away because it is legally gone so there is still this mindset that many Korean people have that the men must provide because they are the family heads and that women are the main caretakers.

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<sup>4</sup> Yang S, Rosenblatt PC. Confucian Family Values and Childless Couples in South Korea. *Journal of Family Issues*. 2008;29(5):571-591. doi:10.1177/0192513X07309462.

<sup>5</sup> OECD. (2017). How Does Korea Compare? The Pursuit of Gender Equality: An Uphill Battle. Paris: *OECD Publishing*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264281318-en>.

<sup>6</sup> Koh, Eunkang. "Gender Issues and Confucian Scriptures: Is Confucianism Incompatible with Gender Equality in South Korea?" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2008, pp. 345–62, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40378774>. Accessed 6 Apr. 2022.

This patriarchal idea means that any non-traditional families (families that do not include a husband, wife, and possible children) are not seen in a positive light in Korea. One of these non-traditional family structures are single parents. The reason for these parents raising a child on their own is not often taken into account when viewing these families, just the fact that they could not achieve the ideal traditional family structure that has been embedded into Korean culture. Single mothers in particular get a lot of mistreatment in society as they are almost seen as outcasts. Single mothers are often “forced into the shadows of society” as they get ostracized by family members and discriminated against at work while raising their child(ren) without a network of support.<sup>7</sup> But this is just one aspect within society that women (as well as men) are discriminated against for.

The current feminist movement in Korea is experiencing its second wave as the push for more equality and ambitious notions to redefine Korean society’s notion of democracy, equality, and prosperity is being fought for.<sup>8</sup> One notable movement that really revitalized the feminist movement in Korea was the #MeToo movement. When that movement was popularized in the United States, it also gained strength in Korea where men in entertainment as well as powerful men in the government were identified as alleged abusers. This was a huge moment for the Korean feminist movements as it, “inspired a generation of women to no longer remain silent about abuse and has also influenced many young men to stand up for their female colleagues at the workplace.”<sup>9</sup> The #MeToo movement was able to garner enough strength for the feminist

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<sup>7</sup> Hu, Elise. "South Korea's Single Moms Struggle to Remove a Social Stigma." *NPR*, 11 May 2015, [www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/05/11/405622494/south-koreas-single-moms-struggle-to-remove-a-social-stigma](http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/05/11/405622494/south-koreas-single-moms-struggle-to-remove-a-social-stigma). Accessed 6 Apr. 2022

<sup>8</sup> Barraclough, Ruth. "Most Read of 2021: The Feminist Renaissance in South Korea." *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, 3 Jan. 2022, [www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-feminist-renaissance-in-south-korea/](http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-feminist-renaissance-in-south-korea/). Accessed 6 Apr. 2022

<sup>9</sup> Strother, Jason. "South Korea's #MeToo Movement Challenges Workplace Sexual Harassment."

movement to have a real foothold and be noticed in society. The feminist movement was able to flourish and even have many other smaller movements that were successful such as the Corest Free movement that rejects the moral standards that are strictly placed on women.<sup>10</sup> Many women took to this movement by chopping off their long hair, not wearing makeup and accessories, and not wearing clothes that had sexual appeal.

However along with the feminist movement in Korea gaining traction came opposition: the anti-feminists. One of the biggest reasons for the anti-feminists in Korea being such a large group is that this group feels like they are experiencing reverse discrimination as women have been gaining rights and status while men's position has remained static. One of the reasons Korean anti-feminists argue that they they are being discriminated against is because of the mandatory military conscription where men, not women, are required to serve for about a year and a half. Today, 65% of Korean men believe that the gendered discrimination that is happening in South Korea is about men, not women (From Military to Makeup, 2021). They argue that feminism opposes and attacks men as it pushes to replace men in top positions with women top positions, rather than pursuing gender equality.<sup>11</sup>

The general organization that I want to have for the finished thesis paper:

#### A. Introduction

##### a. Introduction of the topic and my thesis

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*Voanews*, 11 Nov. 2019,  
[https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific\\_south-koreas-metoo-movement-challenges-workplace-sexual-harassment/6179152.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_south-koreas-metoo-movement-challenges-workplace-sexual-harassment/6179152.html) Accessed 6 Mar. 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Kuhn, Anthony. "South Korean Women 'Escape the Corset' and Reject Their Country's Beauty Ideals." *NPR*, 6 May 2019,  
[www.npr.org/2019/05/06/703749983/south-korean-women-escape-the-corset-and-reject-their-country-s-beauty-ideals](http://www.npr.org/2019/05/06/703749983/south-korean-women-escape-the-corset-and-reject-their-country-s-beauty-ideals). Accessed 6 Apr. 2022.

<sup>11</sup> "From Military to Makeup: The Changing of Korean Male." *Youtube*, uploaded by Joi Lee, 10 Sept. 2021, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmYMGameSic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmYMGameSic). Accessed 25 Feb. 2022.

## B. History

- a. The factors that I think are linked to the current day gendered division in South Korea such as breaking down how Confucianism and patriarchal systems are ingrained within Korean culture

## C. Feminism in South Korea

- a. This section goes in depth about the current things women are discriminated against in society. These are the main reasons for the recent surge in the feminism movement. This also includes the current biggest movements within feminism.

## D. Anti-Feminism in South Korea

- a. Reasons and explanations for why the anti-feminist group was formed and what they believe about gender inequality and reversed discrimination in the government.

## E. Feminism in the United States

- a. This will describe the journey of feminism that has happened in the United States. I will make predictions as to where the current South Korean feminism movement is headed, compared to the feminist movement in the United States (since the United States further along in their feminist movement) based off of trending similarities and difference between these two movements.

## F. Conclusions

- a. Summary of major points talked about in the paper and what my prediction for the future of the feminist and anti-feminist movements in South Korea.

## V. Thesis Committee (and their Qualifications):

1. **Faculty Advisor** My faculty advisor is Professor Jonathan Jarvis. Jonathan Jarvis received his PhD in sociology from the University of Hawaii at Manoa. His current research focuses on families in East-Asia, how globalization affects education achievement in East-Asian nations, and parental practices among immigrants from East Asia. He has a strong interest in Korea as he attended the Korean Language Program in Songang and many of his published works have a specific focus on South Korea. His research in East Asian nations with an emphasis in South Korea makes him an invaluable professor to have on my committee for my thesis project.
2. **Faculty Reader** My faculty reader will be Derek Driggs. He is a currency adjunct faculty in the Korean department at Brigham Young University. He has published works on helping language learners become pragmatically and culturally proficient. He is a current researcher in sociolinguistics at the University of Oxford. His expertise in East Asian Language and culture will aid me in understanding the culture of gender in South Korea.
3. **Honors Coordinator** The Department Honors Coordinator for this project is Stephen D. Ricks. Professor Ricks is the coordinator for all majors that fall under the Asian and Near Eastern Languages department. Since my thesis is related to my Korean major he will be a good person to coordinate between the Korean department and the Honors Program.

## **VI. Project Timeline**

April 2022: Submit Thesis Proposal

August-December 2022: Write the first draft during my semester in South Korea.

January 2023: Return to Brigham Young University and submit first draft to advisor

February 2023: revise and edit and submit second draft to advisor

March 2023: final draft submitted, thesis defense

## **VII. IRB:**

An IRB not needed.

## **VIII. Funding**

Funding is not needed.

## **IX. Culminating Experience**

My goal is to be able to publish my thesis project when I complete it.

## **X. Current Research**

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