UNDER CONSTRUCTION

THE GENDERING OF MODERNITY, CLASS, AND CONSUMPTION IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

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The question I would like to pose is not, Why are we repressed? but rather, Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed? By what spiral did we come to affirm that sex is negated? What led us to show, ostentatiously, that sex is something we hide, to say it is something we silence?

(Foucault 1978, 101–102)

Marriage in Current Korean Popular Culture

Contemporary Korean women struggle against their Confucian cultural heritage as they search for their own sexual subjectivity. My discussion of female sexuality in Korea since 1993 takes the form of a cultural criticism. It focuses on the sociohistorical discourse and textual analyses of three novels, two films, and one television drama that were written, for the most part, by women. First, let me begin with my own experience of the term “sexuality.” I went to Britain for the first time in August 1986, as a British Council Study Fellow in the Faculty of English, Cambridge University. My topic was “Women Characters in Victorian Novels.” During the lectures and seminars, I was acutely embarrassed by what I heard. Why was everyone talking about sexuality, masculinity, and femininity? What was the relationship between those terms and feminist literary criticism?

In those days, Koreans did not have exact counterpart terms for “sex,” “sexuality,” “sexual intercourse,” and “gender.” I was very confused as I struggled to determine the appropriate meanings. In Korean, one very
general term (sŏng) could be used for these four concepts, its particular meaning dependent on the speaking and listening context. Korean society in the mid-1980s did not find it necessary to make sharp distinctions between these concepts. At the annual Korean Women’s Studies Association Conference in 1989, the issue of sex language was raised and discussed. More recently, the Korean counterpart of the term “sexual intercourse” (sŏnggyŏ) has gained wide usage, accompanied by the frequent use of a Korean counterpart for the term “sexual violence” (sŏngp’ŏngmyŏk). In 1991, the Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center opened in Seoul, the first service of this kind. Sexual violence has now become a recognized issue in need of a discourse.

Korean concepts of sexuality have changed profoundly since the Democratic Revolution of 1987 (Howard 1995; Shin and Cho 1996), which transformed the authoritarian military political regime of the last thirty years into a citizens’ democracy. In 1995, the most popular topics among university students were sexuality, sexual identity, and other sexual subjects. There are many reasons for this. I examine one dimension of these changes from a feminist point of view, focusing on the emergent social discourse on female sexuality as it appears in stories of married women in the age range of 25 to 35. In Korea, there is still no broad popular social discourse on female sexuality outside of marriage. The works that I describe are artifacts of a moment when female sexuality is brought into consciousness in unprecedented ways. Precisely because this chapter is about the progressive act of defining a distinctively Korean female sexuality, I have chosen not to lend it with citations from a now-abundant Western literature on gender and sexuality. It is my firm belief that while thought-provoking, no Western theory can satisfactorily account for the social conditions that produce Korean women’s sexuality.

In his book, Understanding Popular Culture, John Fiske writes of the political potential of popular culture that “Popular art is progressive, not revolutionary” (Fiske 1989, 161). Popular culture is not a mere representation of the workings of power in society but also the leading discourse through which current social institutions are subverted in the name of progressive social action. The works that I have selected for this discussion should be considered not only as illustrations of contemporary concerns but also as generating social discourse on female sexuality. Between 1993 and 1996, each publication and each media screening provoked intense discussions throughout Korea.

The novel Marriage (Kyŏhn) by Kim Su-Fivyŏn, a famous television drama writer and novelist in her fifties, was published in 1993 and made into a television drama in 1994. The novel has achieved a wide readership, and the television drama was even more successful. The main plot of Marriage concerns three sisters, Chi-Yŏng, age 34, Sŏ-Yŏng, age 32, and Ch’ae-Yŏng, age 25, and their respective marriages. The three sisters have very different perceptions of marriage, reflecting the different circumstances of their university years. Another novel, Go Alone Like the Rhinoceros’s Horn (Musu’i p’ulchŏp’ŏm honjŏs’u karu) by Kong Chi-Yong, a writer in her early thirties, was also published in 1993 and made the best-sellers list as soon as it appeared. It focuses on the marriages of three woman friends, Hyo-Wan, Kyŏng-Hye, and Yŏng-Sŏn, all 31 years old. This novel was also produced as a play, performed for seven months in 1994, and released as a film in 1995. Both adaptations were successful. The film Mommy Has a Lover (Ŏmmaje oeni saenggyŏsŏyon), was released in May 1995 and was considered a financial success. This film, which focused on a woman’s extramarital love affair, deals with the sexual lives of wives in their late twenties. It challenges the long history of female fidelity and chastity in Korea as enjoined by Confucianism. The novel The Pornography in My Mind (Nae maimiti p’omogopun’i), published about the same time as this film, was written by Kim Pyŏl-A while still in her mid-twenties. In this, her first novel, Kim bravely deals with a previously forbidden theme. The novel rebels against the sexual double standard, insisting on the existence of female sexual desire in contemporary Korea, where adultery is still illegal. In September and October 1996, two cultural products directly attacked established social institutions. The television drama The Lover (Ae), and the film The Adventures of Mrs. Park (Pak Pong-Kon kach’ul sakkŏn) were both commercially successful. These works raise the provocative topic of women’s love affairs outside of marriage and the wife’s abandonment of the home. By analyzing these novels, films, and television dramas, all produced between 1993 and 1996, I explore Korean women’s concepts of female sexuality as they are linked to the profound social transformation of Korean society in these same years.

On the Border Line: Inside/Outside Marriage

In order to understand the marriages of Korean women in their early thirties, it would be helpful to look at the social circumstances in which they were raised. The women were the first of the Korean baby boom generation, born between 1960 and 1965 when Korea had just launched its ambitious economic development plans. Their childhoods coincided with the
I won't divorce you because that would damage the reputation of my family” (Kong 1993, 204). A medical doctor and university lecturer, his idea of marriage is the sexual pleasure he derives from the female body. He expects Kyŏng-Hye to play the role of “The Angel in the Home,” like the epitome of nineteenth-century Victorian femininity. According to Kyŏng-Hye, he states his position simply and reasonably enough “to make her feel as if there is no problem, as long as she finds her proper sexual partner outside of marriage” (204). Kyŏng-Hye has gone back to her old boyfriend and has “seen how he feels after intercourse, even with the light turned on.” When she sees that his response is different from her husband’s, she is consoled because this confirms that she is still sexually attractive (205–206). Kyŏng-Hye’s response is distinctly different from that of a woman of her mother’s generation, who would have had an entirely different concept of female sexuality. Women of the mother’s and grandmother’s generations accepted the sexual double standard as a woman’s fate and put their sexual energy into rearing children, identifying themselves as asexual, strong mother figures. Korean women in Kyŏng-Hye’s generation give priority to their identities as sexual beings, struggling to conceptualize a sense of individual selfhood while the mystified ideology of mothering and family obligation, which has repressed Korean women for so long, collapses (Cho in this volume).8

Kyŏng-Hye’s friend Yong-Sŏn is a tragic victim of this confusion between older notions of female virtue and her own individual desire. Her advice to the third friend, Hye-Wan, reveals a notion of marriage akin to that of their mother’s generation: “You must accept and bear ... Every woman has suffered and endured” (Kong 1993, 276). But why must only a woman suffer and endure?

This question leads Hye-Wan to take a stand outside of marriage. Hye-Wan’s case is more complicated due to her son’s death. Her son dies in a traffic accident while he is following Hye-Wan on the street. On that day, Kyŏng-Hwan, a part-time university lecturer, refuses to take care of their son, even though Hye-Wan must go to work. These circumstances deepen Hye-Wan’s sense of guilt over her irresponsible behavior as a mother. After their son’s death, Hye-Wan and Kyŏng-Hwan go to a party for friends from their university days. When they come back from the party, they quarrel and Kyŏng-Hwan rapes Hye-Wan. This incident lays bare the power structure of patriarchal marriage, where a husband legally possesses and dominates a wife’s human rights through sexuality.

“Don’t argue and analyze like that. Can’t you understand? You’re a married wife. Behave like other women! Like other wives! Why do you think you are
an exception?"... Then, as soon as he entered the gate, he ripped off her clothes. After slapping her cheeks several times, he forced her to part her legs.

It was not his violence itself that caused her to yield, but her recognition that it spelled "The End" for her marriage. "Maybe you don't want to see it. Your wife is still young, she's talking with her old friends, laughing and enjoying herself like old times when she was single. You don't want to see it. So, you need to confirm it. 'You are mine even if you act like a single woman.' To confirm it and feel it, nothing is better than sex... I have never dreamt of being a Cinderella. If I wanted money or social fame, I would not have married him. But, this is not what I want. At least, this is not. No, not!" (82)

This scene is a clear example of "wife rape" in Korean society within the legality of marriage. A husband rapes a wife when he feels intellectually, financially, and socially inferior, because rape is the most effective way to exert the masculine power which a patriarchal culture bestows on him. This very primitive idea, that a wife is one of her husband's possessions and not an independent human being, still exists among highly educated couples in modern Korean society. In short, female sexuality, especially a wife's sexuality, appears as an object to be acquired, possessed, dominated, and conquered.

Even though Hye-Wan has been with Kyong-Hwan for a long time, and even though he has not had any mistresses or subjected her to routine violence in everyday life, the issue of sexual violence remains a problem and ultimately renders them complete strangers to each other. Is it really so difficult to communicate seriously about sexuality?

Another novel, Marriage (Kyŏm), deals with the relationship between female sexuality and money; also a prominent theme in many Victorian novels. This novel illustrates the extent to which a woman's lifestyle depends on the social circumstances of her teenage years in a rapidly changing Korea. Chi-Yŏng, the eldest daughter, succeeds in getting married after threatening suicide when her mother refuses to accept her boyfriend as a son-in-law because of his poor economic prospects. Chi-Yŏng's mother sees marriage as a way to achieve social advancement and material prosperity, as it was in the Victorian era.

These ambitions have come to the forefront in Korea since the 1970s, due to rapid economic development and consequent aspirations to class mobility and consolidation during the last thirty years. This novel is a good illustration of how, given the pace of change in Korea, everybody has a different point of view on marriage, depending on their gender, class, and generation. The issue of communication across generations has become a serious matter. Generation is an important attribute of identity in Korea, like race in the United States.

As the novel develops, Chi-Yŏng's struggle results in profound mental anguish, especially when she discovers that her husband has had a mistress. She feels a deep sense of loss and betrayal. In her suicide note to Ch'ae-Yŏng, Chi-Yŏng confesses, "After almost one year of marriage, I could find it in my heart to say that I have constantly wished to die" (S. Kim 1993, II: 179), "When I had finally discovered his relationship with the other woman, five years after my wedding, I was close to death" (II: 180). Chi-Yŏng, who "loves nothing but her feeling of love" (II: 164), had tried to begin a new life with another married man. She grew even more desperate when she realized that all he had to offer was abuse, while he protected his own marriage. Chi-Yŏng is too faithful, sincere, and naive to struggle with the violence of patriarchal social culture. Like Yŏng-Sŏn in Go Alone Like the Rhinoceros's Horn, Chi-Yŏng commits suicide as the most extreme form of resistance to the condition of being a woman.

The situation of the youngest sister, Ch'ae-Yŏng, is different. Because she desires the social protection that marriage provides and regards marriage as an economically practical contract, she is forced to remain within the institution of marriage. Even when she discovers, during her honeymoon, that her husband, is in the bath with his mistress and that her marriage seems "like putting her head into a bag, filled with snakes" (S. Kim 1993, I: 153), she realizes that she is struggling "to find any clues or excuses to keep her marriage" (I: 205). Through this process, Ch'ae-Yŏng awakens her unconscious anxiety about standing alone outside of marriage. Ch'ae-Yŏng is a member of that youthful Korean age cohort whose vivid memories begin only with the material prosperity of 1980s Korea. Her sense of the world sets her apart from her elder sisters, who are already in their thirties. The sentiments she expresses indicate a remarkable change in Korean women's way of thinking, a striking contrast with views espoused by women who came of age only a few years previously.

The eldest, Chi-Yŏng, lives for love and the second eldest, you, lives for an ideal. I don't want to live in such a poor marriage. Five years after my marriage, planning to buy a tiny apartment from scant, meager savings, having an almost empty refrigerator with only a kimchee jar. No, I am not sure whether I can manage that kind of poor life. (I: 21)

The marriage between Ch'ae-Yŏng, who sees matrimony as a financial proposition and considers love a fantasy, and Hyŏn-Sŏp, who must bow to his parents' hope of becoming the in-laws of a university professor, illustrates how the desire for money and class is activated within the
social institution of marriage. This marriage is sustained by bribes, the BMW which Ch'ae-Yông receives as soon as she comes back from her disastrous honeymoon, and the sum of $380,000, which her mother-in-law gives her when Ch'ae-Yông discovers Hyôn-Sôp's illegitimate son. Because Hyôn-Sôp's family is not highly educated, although they are quite rich, the alliance with a university professor is important to them. Here, you must not simply apply American notions of the relative value of class, education, and money to the Korean context. What Hyôn-Sôp's family needs is a public acknowledgment of honor and respect, which they gain by matrimonial association. In the novel, Ch'ae-Yông's father has been a university professor of law (the most prestigious academic discipline in Korea) for almost thirty years, but he does not know how to make money. That is his wife's job. During the 1970s and early 1980s, middle class Korean wives, women in their fifties, frequently made more than their husbands' salaries through investments and real estate speculation. Ch'ae-Yông's mother is a novelistic representation of those Korean women who would, by whatever means, provide their family with a secure identity as "modern" and "middle class" (see Cho and Abelmann in this volume). The mother favored Ch'ae-Yông's marriage over those of her other daughters, because in this marriage alone she could exercise her motherly desires and maternal authority in the selection of a suitable son-in-law.

The way of thinking of the second eldest sister, Sô-Yông, is the exact opposite of Ch'ae-Yông's. She was deeply involved in the Democratization Movement during her university years in the 1980s. The following dialogue between the two sisters shows the tension between their two different points of view, conflicts that are articulated readily in contemporary Korean society regarding the relationship between money and female sexuality inside marriage.

"Whatever happens in your marriage, how can you complain? Remember, you did it for money! Isn't it a big deal if they give you sums so vast you can't spend them in a lifetime? I don't suppose you refuse it, do you?"

"Who says that I did it for the money? Am I out of my head, money-mad? Did I take nothing but money into account?"

"Stop yelling and be honest with yourself! You decided to marry him just because of money. If it wasn't for money, then what made you decide to marry? Tell me. What is there? Does it make sense that you decided to marry him right after the first meeting, without any hesitation? Why? For what? What made you sure? What deceived you? You didn't know anything about his character, his way of thinking, his future life plan, his sexual habits or history, I mean, whether he can be a proper partner for you, or not. You only knew that he was a healthy man and the heir to great wealth. What do you and the rest of us know about him? Tell me. How could you decide your marriage on such poor information and such short reflection? How could you go forward to marriage? How foolish, how selfish, how irrational can you be?" (S. Kim 1993, I: 170)

In this scene, Sô-Yông cruelly takes off the final mask which barely hides Ch'ae-Yông's great shame. Ch'ae-Yông, who has already made a lifelong deal "because she does not want to fail in her marriage" (S. Kim 1993, II: 16), carefully calculates the possible difficulties and disadvantages should she decide to leave her marriage. Even though she has graduated from a university, she is utterly unprepared for an independent life; she even lacks determination.

"Look... what do you think of my future if I divorce? I'm not interested in studying. Wasting time at home while becoming a family disgrace as a divorced daughter, then, marrying again? To whom? I don't want to have a job. I may not have so many opportunities to meet a nice man as when I was single. Then, imagine that I shall have to agree to another arranged marriage. This time, to whom? To what type of man? Not a bachelor, of course, but a widower or divorced man without any child. Can I even find a man who suits my taste? If my next marriage is going to be just like this one, then isn't it better to remain within this marriage? I could consider it as my second marriage, couldn't I?" (II: 71–72)

Ch'ae-Yông lacks the courage to confront any kind of harsh reality. On reflection, Sô-Yông concludes that Ch'ae-Yông is basically different from herself and accuses her, "You can keep your marriage, receiving stinking money and endless presents for your husband's dirty acts" (S. Kim 1993, II: 41). In fact, Sô-Yông and Ch'ae-Yông embody the most prominent differences between Korean women in their twenties and those in their thirties. The former have constructed their female identities during the period of rapid capitalist development and active opposition to the political regime; they are somewhat idealistic. The latter have known only abundant consumption in their everyday lives and are willing to compromise for the sake of their individual needs and desires.

**The Marriage Story of the "Missy"**

The new term "Missy," invented in 1994, now is used widely as an expression of the strong desire of young Korean wives in their late twenties for an
alternative way of life. This term first was used in 1994 in the marketing advertisement of a grand department store in Seoul. As soon as it came out, it was adopted widely to indicate a particular kind of housewife, a married woman who still looks like a single woman. Even the copywriter was surprised at the speed with which this term took on social meaning and evoked specific images of women and femininity. “Missy” rapidly permeated the Korean language once the advertising industry recognized the consumerist implications of this target age group’s flamboyant desires.

The essential condition of being a Missy is a preoccupation with being looked at. Kim Hoo-Ran (1996) describes the typical Missy as: “a woman walking through a shopping mall in a tight leather miniskirt and long boots and with her short hair flipped” (30). Film, as a visual medium, has provided the best representation of this kind of social desire, not confined to material possessions but inclusive of an active and blatant sexuality. While Kyong-Hye in Go Alone Like the Rhinoceros’s Horn and Chi-Yong in Marriage decide to have lovers in reaction to their husbands’ relationships with mistresses, the Missy jumps into affairs to satisfy her own needs and desires.

Another fundamental condition of membership in the Missy club is her professional job. The film Mommy Has a Lover, released in May 1995, addresses the extramarital love stories of two Missys. The main figure, Un-Chae, a freelance illustrator for a publisher of children’s books, satisfies all the conditions of the Missy. After a seven-year marriage, she possesses a luxurious apartment, an able husband, a pretty daughter, and—as the most important condition—her own professional job. In spite of all this, she falls in love with Chin-U, a foreign exchange dealer, as she gradually discovers that he is gentle, generous, and sweet. Unlike Chiyeong, Un-Chae does not consider his financial situation at all. Un-Chae only considers what she wants to do.

Until very recently, it was common in Korean public discourse to portray women’s reluctance and shame when they intentionally or unintentionally had a lover outside of marriage. Un-Chae, however, never expresses those feelings. For the Missy, the sexual double standard in contemporary Korean society seems to be completely ignored. The advertising copy for this film hyped the sexuality of young Korean wives: “What? Only once a month? One o’clock in the afternoon, why isn’t she at home?” It reports a survey’s findings that “64 percent of the Missys want to have their lovers!” But, the other 36 percent have already had lovers! It sounds as if having a lover is the essential condition for being a Missy. Yun-Su, Un-Chae’s friend, has gone one step further and is divorced. In the end, her lover becomes her second husband. Un-Chae goes back to her former life because Chin-U, after he is promoted, leaves with his wife for a foreign country.

The film is thus quite exceptional in presenting sexual liberation from the wife’s point of view. No woman is punished for her fall, in contrast to the prior conventions of Korean films. The primary audience for this film was housewives in their thirties and forties, women somewhat older than the typical Missy. Considered a success, although not a great success, the film was seen by 100,000 people during a two-week run in Seoul (Cite 21, No. 8, May 1995, 18). The audience’s response at the film’s first showing was divided along gender lines. Men complained about the ending because it seemed to glorify a wife’s affair, while women expressed absolutely no complaint about the story (Ahn 1995).

The development of a sexual identity among women now in their late twenties is described frankly in the first-person narrative of the recent novel The Pornography in My Mind (Nae maumui 'pornogurap'). The novel employs the literary form of a fictional autobiography written by a 26-year-old wife. In the Afterword, in a firm yet modest tone, the author makes clear her purpose for writing this book:

I only hope that this novel is at least able to console the girls with ballooning curiosity, the unmarried women full of conflict and a sense of guilt, and the married women paralyzed by the risk of loss from the exposed secret who resign themselves to the stereotypic duty of mothering. I think that they can be more honest than they are now (I: 284–285).

Kim is writing a young woman’s autobiographical experience of resistance to female fidelity and chastity as symbolized by the silver knife that Confucian culture would enjoin a woman to use to end her own life should her virtue be compromised. She believes that “There is no door in the world that is made for the purpose of not being opened, even if there are locked doors or doors with rusty hinges” (285).

This novel has played an important role in an emergent sexual politics by bringing the forbidden theme of female sexuality into the public sphere via television talk shows and other media events. However, this public discussion has been confined to the experiences of married women. In the novel, I, the first-person narrator, the second child of the Han family, has attempted to establish her own sexual identity. She has cultivated her female self since the late 1980s, when the dominant sociocultural discourse began to move in the direction of sexual topics. She resolved that never in her life would she give up her own desires for the sake of familial
duty. Like her Missey peers, she gives first priority to her own individual self. This is what distinguishes her from older Korean women, even only slightly older Korean women in their thirties. I-Pun says, “I have realized that all the lessons of my parents’ generation are no more than old-fashioned preaching, and they have been choking me for 19 years.” She declares, “My being was filled with the fierce desire never to be a victim of self-sacrifice” (P. Kim 1995, 178–179). This sentiment is in striking contrast with anything we might expect to hear from Korean women over forty. In pursuit of this ideal, I-Pun has tried every kind of experimentation and taken an ambivalent stance, simultaneously naïve and cunning, in her sexual relationships:

Anyway, sexual relationships did not so much provide excitement, as satisfy my curiosity. I am a very skillful single woman and have known sexual pleasure without crossing the boundary of what is acceptable. I didn’t realize that my skill could only be accepted by a gentle, polite partner (who would stay within the boundaries of what is acceptable). At that time, I was too brave to be afraid of anyone or anything, at all (186).

At the age of 24, when she has experimented with her anonymous partner in all of the world’s secrets that had absorbed her curiosity for such a long time, she says that she feels absorbed in an ecstasy such as she has never before experienced (P. Kim 1995, 259). Later, she asks herself, “When can I enjoy sex in the same way that I enjoy playing computer games or bowling?” In the course of this process of sexual self-discovery, I-Pun examines her way of thinking and describes how, “The temptation toward deviation versus old-fashioned morality, these contradictory values are fighting each other in my mind” (256–257). In contrast with Korean men and women in their thirties who define their lives through a metadiscourse, she defines human life as a simple game of standing inside or outside of an accepted boundary (256).

Korean teenagers normally are not allowed much freedom to make any decisions of any kind because of the strong social and familial pressure on them to prepare for university admission. For I-Pun’s generation, sexual relationships would provide the first opportunity to decide their own subjective positions on a specific issue. This is precisely the site of I-Pun’s inner conflict:

I have already experienced the tedium of a morally ethical life as well as the striking ecstasy of deviation. However, I have quite often surrendered my hands to the handcuffs, compromised, and been forced to follow what they call morality. I feel that far less danger lies in the moral life because many people have chosen that way of life (P. Kim 1995, 257).

After her experiment with the anonymous partner, I-Pun accepts that she is “now standing outside the boundary” and recognizes that, “Until now, I have only wished to explore outside of the border line” (P. Kim 1995, 257). But her real conflict comes later, as soon as she begins to suspect that she is pregnant. Here her narration seems to regress, as she states “That deviation was too adventurous an experiment,” and “Outside the boundary, I have awakened many things that I have never felt inside it” (263). When it becomes clear that her pregnancy was an imaginary and psychological symptom, she admits, “To me, the world is as wide as the range of my experience.” From now on, she is not going to accuse anyone of being beyond the pale and she is going to be confident when she stands outside (267).

What I find most interesting in this novel is its illustration of the transformation of the Korean concept of female sexuality as articulated through one specific individual, speaking from a woman’s position. Through I-Pun’s first-person narrative, the reader can follow her search for a satisfactory female sexual identity subjectively as well as concretely. While most female characters in Korean novels worry about the consequences of sexual experience for their future marriage prospects, I-Pun announces, “Because I’m not his possession, I don’t have any complex about being a broken vessel, not at all” (P. Kim 1995, 270). In short, she has her own definition of virginity:

I don’t think that I was soiled or broken. When I blushed with his first gentle kiss, I felt my virginity newly coming into bud. It is not that I am not a virgin, but that I can be a virgin always, whenever I stand in front of my true love. This is my own definition of virginity (271).

Perhaps by now you have noticed the wide gap between Ch’ae-Yŏng’s and I-Pun’s understanding of female sexuality, even though both characters are described as being in their twenties. While Ch’ae-Yŏng’s story is told from the perspective of her mother’s generation by an author who is in her mid-fifties, I-Pun’s story is narrated from within the perspective of her own generation. The woman in her twenties fashions a sexual identity focused on individual desire; the woman in her fifties is more concerned with materialistic desires. For I-Pun, the first consideration for marriage is her own desires, not what she can gain materially. For I-Pun, her own experiences, mediated through her female body, are of prime significance; marriage
means the embodied duty of bearing and rearing a man’s baby in her womb (P. Kim 1995, 271). She hesitates because she is not sure whether she can keep her liberated way of life after marriage. In the end, she finally decides to settle down with her husband because she is confident that he has the special skill to heal all her wounds and not compound them.

In Korean culture, where an unmarried woman’s sexual experience implies a big, dangerous burden, and every woman is educated to respond negatively to sex, a researcher claims that a young woman could have an invaluable chance to restructure her repressed notions of sex and sexuality through her own sexual experience (Y. Cho 1995, 94). I-Pun’s transformation well illustrates how a woman could gain a subjective understanding of female sexuality through such a process of experientially constructing her own sexual identity. I-Pun’s husband, by contrast, is described in the novel as an ambiguous and anonymous character, a conspicuous strategy in contemporary Korean women’s writing to emphasize the female subject.

THE NEW SEXUAL MORALITY: THE CHALLENGE OF EXPERIMENTATION

In September 1996, a television drama, The Lover (Aein), stirred Korean society with the extramarital love story of two highly successful professionals in their mid-thirties. It reached a 36.3 percent second audience rating in October 1996 (K. Kim 1996). It even was discussed in the National Assembly because of the social implications of its theme, a challenging portrayal of a married woman’s sexuality. This response reveals how powerful the television media is in subverting the traditional ideology of female sexuality. The heroine, Yŏ-Kyŏng, is a married career woman working at an advertising agency. She has a nine-year-old daughter who attends elementary school. Her husband, U-Ihyŏk, is a typical “company man,” socialized during Korea’s peak decades of industrial activity. He has been devoted to the company as a route to the professional promotion that will satisfy his social ambition. He is almost incapable of communicating with Yŏ-Kyŏng. This circumstance provides the impetus for Yŏ-Kyŏng to fall in love with Un-O. He is a professionally successful businessman in his late thirties. Like Chin-U in Mommy Has a Lover, Un-O has a soft, gentle, and sweet personality, reflecting the new masculinity of 1990s Korea. He also has the perfect wife and two boys. There is no substantive reason for him to fly from his family. However, like the Missy’s love story, The Lover explores the adventurous and forbidden theme of an extramarital affair, this time through the medium of television. But an extramarital love story of people in their thirties must confront the issue of familial duties.

Many married men in their forties and fifties called the broadcasting company to protest this drama, demanding “What is it trying to say?” On the other hand, a feminist scholar evaluates it highly, saying, “This drama gives serious consideration to an important issue rather than reducing it to simple human interest” (So 1996, 104). For Western readers, the extramarital love story is such a familiar theme that there is nothing exceptional about it. In the Korean cultural context, it has been usually labeled as immoral and a wife’s extramarital affair is seen as particularly, even fatally, damaging to the family. Even though the Missy’s extramarital love story in Mommy Has a Lover is regarded as a new cultural phenomena in 1990s Korea, it has not been sufficiently influential to shake the dominant social discourse by challenging the patriarchal ideology on female sexuality. The Lover is different.

There are, I think, two reasons for this. One has to do with the particular impact of television, the other with the generational difference between the two heroines. As a popular medium, television is much more conservative, and, because of the wide range of its audience, it exerts a much greater influence through its representation of everyday realities. It can even penetrate the small private space of a tiny room. In addition, when an extramarital love story concerns people in their thirties, the issue of familial obligations assumes greater weight. Therefore, it highlights the conflict between Korean familiai and female sexuality.

Comparing the American film Falling in Love (1984) and the Korean television drama The Lover (1996), Yŏm Ch’ŏn-Hŭi (1996) argues that the implication of the ending, in which Un-O and Yŏ-Kyŏng separate and return to their original homes, can be read as equivalent to the ending of Falling in Love, in which each character separates from and divorces their former spouse. In The Lover, as in the American film, the final sequence of episodes seems to be artificially orchestrated toward an inevitable outcome (59). This artificiality is mainly motivated by the conservatism of the Korean audience.

Nonetheless, I see this television drama as having accomplished a great deal in bringing into public discourse the issue of a middle-aged wife’s sexuality. Until recently, the wife’s subjective sexuality has been elided by the web of obligations spun by the husband’s family or by the terms of a wife’s subordination to her husband, as in Hye-Wan’s case in Go Alone Like the Rhinoceros’s Horn. However, in the mid 1990s, as the wife’s subjective sexuality emerged through the weakening of Korean familial, a sympathetic
rapport between a man and a woman became more important than the functional enactment of role obligations between a husband and wife, or of a father and mother to their children.

In September 1996, in the same moment that television audiences were watching *The Lover*, a new film portrayed a middle-aged wife’s even more radical story, *The Adventures of Mrs. Park* (Pak Pong-Kon kach’ulakkón) searched for a new morality that recognizes a wife’s subjective sexuality and individuality. The film employed the romantic comedy genre but it was far from typical of the comedies that had been ubiquitous in the Korean commercial film industry since the 1980s. I call it an alternative romantic comedy because it gives a slight twist to the conservatism of the genre. Most Korean romantic comedies end with a happy marriage, the patriarchal ideology intact. This film, however, ends with Pong-Kon’s second marriage, thus subverting a traditional morality that expects the runaway wife to come back home to restore everyone’s happiness and familial security.

The film begins with an eight-year-old boy’s schoolroom narration of why he has two fathers. According to the boy, his mother, Pong-Kon, has absconded because she could not endure the patriarchal aura of her husband, Hūi-Chae, a company baseball team director. Their inability to communicate is illustrated in the first scene, where we see them eating together at the dining table. After Pong-Kon leaves, Hūi-Chae employs a private detective, X, to find her. Through the process of looking for Pong-Kon, X falls in love with her and finally marries her.

This film presents a wife whose lifestyle and class orientation are very different from the Missy’s. Pong-Kon has a humble dream. She wants to become a singer, and this motivates her to run away. She comes from a definitely lower class than Un-Chae in *Mommy Has a Lover* and Yŏ-Kyŏng in *The Lover*. Middle-aged, lower class wives usually have been represented in Korean popular films as submissive to their very patriarchal husbands due to their economic dependence. But in this film, once she has run away, Pong-Kon is able to make money on her own and takes the private voice lessons that will bring her dream into reality. The film poster hints that Pong-Kon is in possession of two men simultaneously. She is depicted as embracing them both and bursting into laughter while Hūi-Chae and X stare fiercely at each other.

In fact, the film director was worried about how a conservative audience might respond to this uncommon story and its unexpected ending. The film suggests that Korean wives in the middle and lower classes today are subjectively searching for their individuality and sexuality, influenced by the Korean women’s movement since the 1980s, which has delivered a message of self-actualization to young women. This feminist assertion now is articulated widely, not only by middle class wives, but by lower class wives as well. One research survey, carried out in the same month as the film’s release, relates that 59 percent of Korean married women have felt the urge to run away, feeling resentful when husbands undermined their pride (Kwak 1996a, 169).

This film was a great commercial success, presumably because it addressed their feelings. Approximately 170,000 people saw it during the first three weeks of its Seoul release. However, the film critics’ responses were divided. A woman critic praised the new director’s successful experimentation, transforming what would, in real life, be a serious event into a cheerful tale of elopement (M. Lee 1996, 64). She commended the director’s cinematic imagination and his techniques of representation. Another woman critic faulted the director on this same point, arguing that the film glosses over its most substantial issue, why a housewife would run away from home. The wife’s flight becomes a mere plot device facilitating the story of a pleasurable escape (Kwak 1996b, 254).

I agree with Kwak, in part, but I would like to underscore the social message implicit in the film’s cheerful ending: Pong-Kon emerges victorious in her search for subjective selfhood. Such an ending is possible only because the director chose to deal with this story in the romantic comedy genre, using a witty and humorous touch. If he had opted for more somber realism, he could not have arrived at that destination. How one chooses to represent the story is as important as the story itself.

As with *The Lover*, the potential and limitations of different media are crucial to determining how a certain story develops and gives its radical message a broad hearing in society. Feminist aesthetics and politics must be negotiated through prior conventions of cultural production. These two stories, *The Lover* and *The Adventures of Mrs. Park*, exemplify necessary compromises in producing works that challenge feminist ideology. Lee Chang-Soon (1996), the director of *The Lover*, emphasizes that his intention is to expose the contemporary moment as “The Age of Hypocrisy” where expressed morality, the product of Confucian culture, persists despite its incompatibility with contemporary social reality. He insists that “It is high time we formulated a new morality through a social consensus arrived at through diverse kinds of discussion” (105).

Both stories have experimented with the possibility of recognizing a new morality governing middle-aged wives’ subjective sexuality and individuality. The social discourse around these two stories has shown that female sexuality in modern Korea is no longer symbolized by the silver
knife or dominated by Confucian notions of fidelity and chastity. Rather, a woman's sexuality has become the barometer of her own subjectivity.

**The Prospects for the Social Concept of Sexuality in Twenty-First-Century Korea**

My reading of the concept of female sexuality in Korean popular culture might suggest that Korean society is now at a stage of development comparable to America in the 1970s, when every kind of women's issue appeared in the realistic novel form. My argument may recall such works as Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973), Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), and Marilyn French's *The Woman's Room* (1978). If this parallel holds, then what kind of story is unfolding in twenty-first-century Korea? It is not difficult to imagine that a viable revolution against sexual repression might take place. Many young Korean women novelists have confessed that it is in marriage that they have begun to recognize their repression as women for the very first time. Novelist Oh Su-Yŏn (Oh, Shin, and Song 1995) describes this process in an interview with other young woman novelists in their mid-twenties:

> When I went into the real world after my university graduation, everything was different from what I had heard at school. Everything was a lie. That's how I feel. They must teach us about real situations, not just talk (in abstractions) about the inequality between men and women. While I was adapting myself to the social structure, I began to think about my life as a woman. I found that the problem was that I have never before thought of myself as a woman. Both marriage and the family system have intensified my repression to a very high degree. I think the most important fact of my life is that I am living a woman's life, not that I am repressed because of being a woman. . . . For me, being honest with myself means the realization that I am a woman and I am living as a woman. So, naturally, my writing incorporates this awakening and now I'm in the middle of struggling with how to do it well (165–166).

Writers in this younger generation have a clear idea of their sexual identity. They would like to create the image of a new woman who has already passed through the process of self-struggle and appears as a "subjective" woman. Shin I-Hyŏn, another participant in that interview, offered similar comments (Oh, Shin, and Song 1995, 166). The three novelists are beacons for the future direction of Korean women's writing as well as for a more liberated social discourse on female sexuality.

But while this discussion of the changing process of female sexuality in popular culture from 1993 to 1996 gives the impression that Korean women now are marching to demand their sexual subjectivity, in reality, most Korean women are marching only as the passive consumers of the sorts of cultural products described previously, not as their active cultural producers. When women are able to intervene in the process of cultural production as subjective consumers with a feminist point of view, the Korean concept of female sexuality can be transformed more rapidly than before.

A survey of 300 married women in Seoul, conducted in December 1996, just after the success of *The Lover* and *The Adventures of Mrs. Park*, found that the majority of Korean married women are not yet inclined to experience sexuality outside of marriage or to take sexual initiatives within marriage, even if they are now strongly influenced by a social discourse of sexual liberation. According to this survey, 55 percent of the women interviewed consider sex with one's husband as the wife's duty. Only 22 percent prioritize desire, and another 22 percent define the purpose of sexual intercourse as the confirmation of their love. On the other hand, 93.7 percent of the respondents claim that they never have considered divorce on the basis of sexual dissatisfaction. Only 6.3 percent have considered divorce for this reason. While 35.4 percent have been tempted by an extramarital love affair out of discontentment with their husbands, like Yŏ-Kyŏng in *The Lover*, only 27.7 percent admitted being tempted owing to their own sexual instinct (*Talk about Women* 1996).

If we are to form a new sexual subjectivity and morality, what we urgently need is a flourishing of more diverse discourses derived from various aspects of women's sexual experience. Cho Haejoong (1996) emphasizes the fundamental importance of this experiential process for forming and nurturing a new subjectivity, especially in non-Western, postcolonial societies like Korea, which have never struggled to achieve suffrage and therefore lost a critical lesson in how to organize women for an institutional reformation.

The recent social discourse on homosexuality is a precise example of this new wave of awareness coming from more diverse experiential discussions. Since January 1995, books, films, and television dramas have begun to deal with homosexuality as a theme, although none of the main characters in any best-selling novel has been a manifest homosexual yet. It is still noteworthy that some minor characters in women's fiction have been portrayed as homosexuals. Meanwhile, on the university campuses a political
movement for homosexual rights has gone into action. Homosexual student unions have organized and published a monthly newspaper. The Korean lesbian community, kkirikkiri, organized with just six members on November 27, 1995, has grown to 200 members in one year's time (Khirikkiri 1996).

Looking at Korean culture with a certain detachment, I can imagine that the years 1995 and 1996 will be remembered as a critical period for the emergence of a social discourse on sexuality, especially female sexuality. The year 1995 was particularly remarkable in that housewives began, on their own initiative, to speak in public about wives' subjective sexuality. Apart from the novel The Pornography in My Mind, Lee Chae-Kyong and Kim Yong-Mi published Sex Talk Written by Housewives. The two writers have confessed that they were able to write the book because they are ajumma (married women), who can freely talk about sex as privileged by their own sexual experiences. In 1997, the annual Korean Women's Studies Association Conference chose as its theme “The Feminist Approach to Sex Culture and Education in Korea.”

It is an interesting coincidence that the May OECD Economic Surveys (1996) describes 1995 as the year in which the level of per capita income in Korea reached almost $10,000, predicting a doubling to $20,000 by 2001 (13). The national economy has had an overwhelming influence on all other areas of daily life for all Koreans, and nobody can ignore the radical changes in lifestyle that a society experiences as it attains new levels of capitalist development and a rising level of GNP. Even with the economic downturn since November 1997, this tide is still in motion.

There can be no return to a sexually inarticulate past. Korea is now entering into a new stage with respect to women's issues. As is true of the women's movements of western Europe and North America, we can begin to confront the politics of daily life in the private domain where each individual struggles with intimate issues, including the issue of female sexuality. I can state with fair certainty that discourses of female sexuality will continue to gain ground within Korean society, accelerating in both volume and diversity. We will find Korean women's sexual subjectivity in that particular borderland of the global village between Korea's Confucian cultural heritage and Western views of sexual pleasure and desire.

**NOTES**

An earlier version of this chapter was delivered at the East Asian Studies Seminar on January 24, 1996, at the University of Durham, and at the Gender Studies Seminar on January 30, 1996, at the University of Hull, United Kingdom.

1. This is one of the main reasons why Kim Hak-Sun, then in her late sixties, became the first former Korean military sexual slave of the Japan empire who felt empowered to come forward to tell her story at a church group's office in Seoul on August 14, 1990.

2. “Muso” is the Korean name for the animal rhinoceros unicornis. The novel draws on its most characteristic feature, its solitary horn. While the unicorn only existed in Western mythology, the rhinoceros lived in South Asia and Africa in historic times. The rhinoceros's horn in the title emphasizes independence and subjectivity in real social circumstances.

3. Korea's rapid economic development began in 1961. Korea is considered one of the few countries that have managed the transition from a rural, underdeveloped society to a modern economy in just one generation. Since 1963, economic growth has averaged 8 percent a year, bringing a twelve-fold increase in output while per capita income has risen seven-fold during the same period (OECD 1996, 124).

4. Wonmo Dong (1988) argues that one of the most serious contradictions of Korean education in the 1970s and 1980s was the school curriculum's unrealistic emphasis on the virtue of liberal democracy, a philosophy that was incongruous with the reality of military-controlled authoritarianism in Korea.

5. Although the student movement in Korea has a historical tradition, dating back as early as the fifteenth century, it failed to receive scholarly attention until the 1980s when student demonstrations became a daily ritual. For the characteristics of the Korean student movement in the 1980s, see Dong (1987) and Lew (1993).

6. The serious differences in gender-role expectations among students have been documented. In 1994, the Korean Association for Democracy and Sisterhood (Yŏsŏng Minuhoe) surveyed 214 primary and middle school students, asking whether they would like to be a woman like mother (to girls) or a man like father (to boys). In the case of girls, 52.3 percent answered no and 42.3 percent answered yes. In the case of boys, 69 percent answered yes and 24.5 percent answered no (KBS-TV, Morning Ground, "I don't want to live like my mother," 14 June 1995).

7. In the Confucian gender structure, the woman's position was clearly subordinate to the man's. However, a woman as mother could exert lasting influence on her child's intellectual and emotional development, thus acquiring limited authority.

8. Martina Deucher (1992, 258) argues that the pattern of Confucian behavior for women demanded the rigidity of a stereotype, which did not allow for individual variations. In other words, Confucian society historically acclaimed particular women not for their individuality, but for the degree of perfection with which they were able to mimic the stereotype.
9. In Korea, "wife rape" is not officially considered a crime of sexual violence under the criminal code. Shim Young-Hee (1992, 253–254) argues, based on her research in 1990, that 67.3 percent of Korean married women have experienced "wife rape" but only 35.5 percent of these women recognized it as an act of sexual violence.

10. For instance, the term "washing board" was used to describe a wife's passive and subordinate sexuality in the 1992 Korean film A Story of Marriage. Since then, "the washing board" has gained wide circulation among young Korean women as a metaphor for current perceptions of female sexuality.

11. For a description of contemporary Korean matchmaking practices, where these concerns are aired, see Kendall (1996).

12. The generational factor is one of the most important explanatory variables for the attitudinal and behavioral patterns of contemporary Koreans. Wonmo Dong (1993, 2) insists that no other country in the world has been beset with as serious a problem of generational alienation and disaffection as the Republic of Korea in recent decades.


14. Un-O's wife faints during an acquaintance's wedding ceremony and is carried to a hospital, where her third pregnancy is discovered. This incident prevents Un-O and Yë-Kyöng from flying to America, where they had planned to start a new life. After a business failure, U-Hyok, Yë-Kyöng's husband, begins to regret abandoning his family for the sake of a professional promotion. Through this artificial-seeming plot contrivance, Un-O and Yë-Kyöng separate and return to their respective homes. In the last scene, one year after they have parted, they meet by chance in a crowded department store at a shopping mall.

15. The woman scriptwriter included a sexual encounter in an early episode, but after many viewers called the broadcasting company with objections to this scene, the writer refrained from portraying sexual desire in subsequent episodes.


17. This was announced in Cine 21, No. 74, 15–22 October 1996, 26.

18. Park Hye-Ran (1996) argues that Korean married women over forty are also very interested in searching for their identity as sexual subjects through extra-marital relationships because the priority of their desires now is moving from materialistic prosperity and familial security to subjective individuality. However, in her diagnosis, most of these women are standing on the borderline between fantasy and reality.

19. The last scene in Ch'oe Yun's "The Last of Hanak'o" (1997) hints at the heroine's possible lesbian identity, describing her relationship with her friend as

"sometimes colleagues, sometimes partners." In If Mozart Is Alive (1995) by Kim Mi-Jin and in The Thought on the Knife (1995) by Kim I-So, minor characters are described as homosexuals. SongKyöng-A directly deals with the lesbian issue in "Trout and Sweetfish" (1994), although she has chosen to represent this issue in an imaginary space of her own creation.

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LIVING WITH CONFLICTING SUBJECTIVITIES:
MOTHER, MOTHERLY WIFE, AND SEXY
WOMAN IN THE TRANSITION FROM
COLONIAL-MODERN TO POSTMODERN KOREA

cho haejoang

You probably are familiar with the celebrated story of south Korea’s miraculous economic transformation. You may not have heard the terrible story of its cultural transformation—a story about regressive changes in the roles and images of women in late twentieth-century south Korean society.

When I came to the United States to do my graduate study in 1971, I was shocked by certain forms of women’s behavior. During my first semester at a Midwestern state university, I lived in a dormitory for female graduate students. On Friday nights at the dorm, inevitably one saw students looking as depressed as if they were at a funeral. They were the “leftover” girls who did not have dates. One of those girls, who considered herself unattractive and shy, told me, “I envy you because you can marry by parental arrangement!” Her comment puzzled me because I had been teased recently by a “sexy” undergraduate female student, “How barbarian you Koreans are! I’ve heard that you people marry someone with whom you are not in love.”

I felt uncomfortable seeing a nice girl so depressed just because she did not have a date, and another girl who behaved so arrogantly, as if she could do whatever she wanted, just because she was sexy. I was annoyed by young women who tried so hard to present themselves as sex objects. The sight of older women who struggled desperately to look young and sexy depressed me. The American rule that one should never ask a woman’s age puzzled me. A male American classmate told me repeatedly, with anguish on his face, that I must realize what was in the heads of American people: “Their minds are filled with sex. Haejoang—you’d better realize that.”

In my opinion, the United States was a terrible place for women. Of course, in south Korea there were also girls who wanted to be sexy and