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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT by Jennifer J. Jung-Kim

Gender & Modernity in Colonial Korea

THE RECONSTRUCTION of gender identities was central to the modernization process in colonial Korea (1910–1945). A consideration of how women and men of all classes individually and collectively negotiated changing political, social and economic conditions to constitute themselves as subjective agents is crucial to understanding the twentieth-century transformation of Korean society and culture. Using newspapers and magazines as primary sources, I examine their production, content, and readership to better understand their role in the ongoing reformulation of gender identities.

First, I examine attributes of the elite, urban New Women that made them so “modern” in the eyes of contemporary social critics. How did the media depict the New Women as positive and negative cultural icons reflecting colonial, patriarchal, and feminist desires and anxieties?

Second, how did women confront work and how were working women depicted in the media? How did elite women forge new paths to become career women? How did working-class women, including new factory “girls” and those in traditional occupations as *kisaeng* (courtesans) and *haenyô* (divers) seek to voice themselves through alternative means like publishing or labor activism?

Third, how did the construction of New Women’s identities relate to the formulation of new masculine identities? How did representations of men’s appearances and attitudes show how men sought to shape masculine roles within the context of colonial modernization?

My findings are that New Women shared many qualities with their “old-style” predecessors, as New Women were expected to use their newfound understanding to be more enlightened wives and mothers. As such, media depictions about the New Woman’s appearances and outlook were largely exaggerated because of social anxieties, although the images were loosely based on elite, pioneering women.

Additionally, it was not just the elite women who used creative means to voice their workplace discontent. Women at all levels of society and in nearly every occupation engaged in labor activism, transforming themselves into new women.

Finally, men also negotiated the same complex issues of modernity, gender, class, and colonialism. Thus it is important to see how they shaped each other and reinforced positive and negative aspects of a modernizing (wo)manhood.



Jennifer J. Jung-Kim received her Ph.D. in East Asian Languages and Cultures. She has accepted a position as Assistant Professor in the East Asian Studies Program at Smith College and will be starting in the fall. She is the winner of the 2006 Mary Wollstonecraft Dissertation Award.