ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the challenges to gender equality and the resistance thereto in the realms of law, language, and sexuality as well as the link to Confucianism in these systems of inequality. While Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism do not hold as much outright power in modern South Korea, the vestiges of their impacts remain and continue to be an oppositional force to calls for women’s rights through feminism. The three aspects I chose to write about contain clear examples of modern forms of sexism in South Korea, as well as continuities of Confucian thoughts regarding women’s roles and women’s statuses in society at large. Methodologically, I utilize newspapers, journal articles, feminist websites, and existing scholarship to create a cohesive argument about the continuous oppression faced by women. This thesis finds that despite progress towards gender equality, South Korea still falls short in these realms. This inequality needs to be addressed in order to increase the quality of life for Korean women. The South Korean election of the conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol demonstrates that misogynistic and sexist beliefs about women continue to be upheld in Korean society at large. The results of this thesis indicate that change is slowly ongoing but still necessary for full gender equality to be reached.

Key words: South Korea, feminism, Confucianism, South Korean feminism, #MeToo Movement, Korean language, Korean gender norms, sexism in Korean
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Chapter One

Introduction

In the summer of 2015, a Korean radical feminist group called Megalia began to push back against misogyny on online message boards, namely DC Inside. Following the outbreak of the MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, caused by a coronavirus), a story on an online forum about two Korean women who went shopping in Hong Kong despite being infected and refusing to quarantine went viral, causing rampant misogynistic reactions, like name-calling and blaming these women for tarnishing South Korea’s reputation abroad (Steger). Despite the story being proven false, and that the first person to contract and spread this virus in South Korea was a man, the misogyny continued unchecked.

In response, female users began to employ a method called mirroring, wherein the female users changed the subjects of sentences aimed at degrading women to be aimed at men. As a result, terms like “kimchi-nyeo” (김치녀, “kimchi-girl”), a slang term that refers to materialistic and promiscuous young women, was altered to become “kimchi-nam” (김치남, “kimchi-man”). The simple act of turning a misogynistic phrase around to be directed at the users who first weaponized it caused an uproar. DC Inside banned the mirrored terms (i.e., kimchi-nam) while leaving the original misogynistic terms untouched, as they had done for over a decade (Seo and Choi 378, 381-382, Jeong 94). This story highlights the unequal repercussions of gendered slurs. While kimchi-nyeo has been a term for years, utilized to paint women as promiscuous, self-centered, money-hungry beings, the invention of kimchi-nam, intended to demonstrate the magnitude to which Korean women face misogyny on a daily basis, was banned mere days after its conception. In essence, the reaction was banned, while the action was not. Women, then, were
punished for name-calling men (a made-up term with no social consequence) while men were able to continue to use gendered slurs against women. This story is just one example of the consistent gender inequality in South Korea and demonstrates how this inequality is not only confined to the “real world.”

According to the World Economic Forum, in 2021 South Korea’s rank on the Global Gender Gap Report was 102 out of 156. While up six places from 108 in 2020, South Korea’s score of .687 out of 1 indicates that true gender equality is still a long way away (Global Gender Gap 2021 10). While the gender gap in South Korea is slowly improving, the underlying challenges to South Korean feminism must be addressed in order to understand the challenges facing women’s rights activists in South Korea, and to speed up the process so that women can enjoy equality to their male counterparts sooner. Understanding the underlying beliefs that inhibit women’s rights prioritizes these issues and will lead to a better understanding of why inequality persists and how best to oppose the rhetoric and systems that keep women subjugated.

Furthermore, the surge of anti-feminist movements not only misunderstand what feminism is, misinterpreting it as misandry, they also employ misogynistic rhetoric while claiming they support women’s rights, stating “[w]e [anti-feminists] don’t oppose elevating [women’s] rights, ... but feminists are a social evil” (Choe, “The New Political Cry”). What they seem to mean, however, is that they support women’s rights on men’s terms. This means that they will use misogynistic language to degrade feminists, calling them “pigs” and claiming that “feminism is a mental illness,” in order to dissuade women from identifying as a feminist in order to receive support from men (ibid.). These men support women’s rights when it benefits them, but, in reality, they only support a women’s rights movements that they find palatable, not one that actually supports women in order to grant them equality. For example, these same
antifeminists who claim to support equal rights lambast prominent female Korean celebrities for not following traditional beauty norms, like An San (안산), a twenty-one-year-old female who is a three-time gold medalist in the Tokyo Olympics, for having short hair (Young). Rather than celebrate a young woman’s achievement, antifeminists question whether she is a feminist or not because of her hairstyle, as though her identity as a feminist negates her talent and victories (Young).

The modern Korean feminist movement comes after nearly a century of women’s movements in which Korean women argued for more equality in various realms. In the 1910s and 1920s in Korea (which was under Japanese colonialism at the time) the image of the “new woman” (신여자) emerged (Choi 26). New women rejected the backwards ideas of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) and began to argue for women’s liberation, in part due to their access to higher education and a recognition of the unfair laws and policies that limited women’s rights (ibid. 26-28). While the movement did bring awareness to the vast amount of gender equality, very little institutional changes were made at the time. Furthermore, The South Korean Labor Movement began under the Park Chung-hee regime, which lasted from 1961 to 1979. The Labor Movement was active during the 1970s because of Park’s suppression of worker’s rights, which resulted in women’s working unions becoming established (Kim and Kim, “Mapping a Hundred Years” 196-197). With many young women joining the workforce and facing abusive working conditions including extremely low wages and exploitative work environments, opposition to the regime began to rise, causing women to form unions with the purpose of bringing attention to a social issue (ibid. 197). The establishment of these groups should be noted because Park banned many activist organizations, including women’s organizations (ibid.). While they were able to oppose the regime and receive attention, no long-lasting reforms came out of this period.
Chun Doo Hwan, who took power after Park’s assassination, attempted to prevent opposition like his predecessor, but pro-democracy advocates surged in numbers, and progressive women’s organizations formed once again (ibid.). One key difference with these groups, though, is that they were social change movements. Their goals included democratization and women’s liberation through the restructuring of society at large (ibid.). At this time women’s groups formed with gender equality and feminism as their primary focus, setting the stage for the progress we have seen throughout the 2000s and to the modern day.

This persistence of gender inequality in the modern day in South Korea indicates a pervasive underlying belief of women’s inferiority. As a result of a variety of cultural traditions, women have had to continue to fight for their rights and for their freedom from oppressive structures that aim to keep them in a subservient position. This thesis puts an emphasis on Confucianism, but also seeks to evaluate the degree in which Confucianism affects gender inequality without discounting other potential ideologies that result in the oppression of women in modern-day South Korea. “Confucianism” as a term is one that is broad and encompasses a variety of beliefs and practices. The “Confucianism” referred to throughout this thesis refers to the Neo-Confucian policies and doctrines that became entrenched in Korea as a widely upheld cultural and civil code during the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) (Haboush 1929). The patriarchal vision of the family put forth by Neo-Confucianism conflicted with existing familial practices in Korea; however, due to the political influence Neo-Confucianism had garnered, changes to the familial structure were able to be enforced (ibid. 1931). The Neo-Confucian (hereafter referred to as “Confucian” or “Confucianism”) view of women was one of inferiority; women were seen as mentally or morally inferior to men, and while the male gender role was to cultivate the mind and spirit, women’s role was to bear children, especially sons (T. Kim 100). Therefore, a
woman’s worth rested in her body and its ability to produce heirs—for which she was blamed if she did not. In this way, Confucianism reduced women to objects for the furthering of the male line. While in the modern day, such egregious beliefs about women are not commonplace, the threads of Confucianism remain and continue to challenge women seeking gender equality in the name of preserving traditional culture. This thesis seeks to examine the causal factors of this inequality in several aspects of society: law, language, and sexuality. These are not the only aspects of Korean culture that still negatively affect women; however, these are three of the most visible in society.

Legislation centered around women’s rights and protections for women became more commonplace with the implementation of the Ministry of Gender Equality in 2001, during the Kim Dae-Jung administration (Kim and Kim, *The Korean Women’s Movement* 12). With the passing of progressive laws such as the National Human Rights Commission Act (2001), The Act on the Prevention of Sexual Traffic and Protection, etc. of Victims Thereof (2004) and The Act of the Punishment of Acts of Arranging Sexual Traffic (2004) and the bill that abolished the family-head system in 2005. Legal precedent reflects governmental protections for women which should, in theory, be implemented in everyday life, thereby making women more equal in status to men; however, it should be noted that these laws have not completely eradicated sexism, but progress has been made in terms of women’s protection in the workplace and in some social contexts involving the family.

Language impacts how one is perceived, and the language surrounding women both in the way they speak and the way they are spoken about gives an indication of how women are viewed in society. Certain terms used for female-dominated professions previously utilized vocabulary that was less prestigious and indicative of lower-class status than that of male-
dominated professions until public outcry led to the alteration of these words to reflect more equality (Y. Cho 192). In women’s speech patterns, women often alter their speech to appear softer or gentler, which demonstrates how women feel they must be accommodating to men and how society deems it unacceptable for a woman to be assertive (Y. Cho 191-193). In the online space, gendered slurs used to degrade women have led to the creation of radical feminist groups utilizing unorthodox methods to reveal misogyny in modern South Korea; however, despite these efforts, misogyny continues to run rampant in male-dominated online communities (Steger).

Sexuality brings women’s autonomy over their own body into the forefront, and the societal emphasis on chastity not only has harmful implications for the way women who break this code are viewed by society but also gives men the power over women’s bodies. With the Korean comfort women issue coming to light in the 1990s, the question of female bodily autonomy continues in South Korea to this day, especially regarding issues of sex and chastity (Kim and Kim, The Korean Women’s Movement 33). Women feeling as though they cannot report sexual assault due to the shame and destruction of their purity, or, in extreme cases, even being forced to marry their rapists, stems from older practices in the Joseon Dynasty where some women who were sexually assaulted were told that their only option was to commit suicide, as their value as women was diminished. In contrast, men’s chastity is rarely called into question, and it is often seen as “natural” or “normal” to have sexual relations and commit adultery, whereas it is unthinkable for the same to be true of women (Shim 138-140).

Wives are expected to be demure and pure but seductive and exciting for their husbands, but women do not have the same freedom to explore their sexuality as men do, and when Korean women do not live up to the ideal of their husband, the husband believes it is his right to cheat on his wife in the name of sexual fulfillment. The idea that a spouse can commit adultery due to
lack of fulfillment is deemed fair for men, but society finds it unacceptable for a woman to
commit adultery for the exact same reason (Shim 136-138). The Confucian societal construct
emphasizing female chastity defines women as objects rather than human beings and ties their
worth to the societal concept of virginity and faithfulness rather than their intrinsic worth as
people. The practice of objectifying women’s bodies became cemented with Confucianism and
was bolstered through other practices and beliefs, such as Christianity. The dual constructions of
sexuality and chastity place women in a double bind, wherein they are criticized by society for
expressions of the sexuality for not valuing their chastity, or they are criticized for being “too
chaste” and not being sexual enough for their husbands.

However, Confucianism as being fundamentally opposed to gender equality and solely
serving as a tool for male domination is not a universally held concept. Eunkang Koh argues that
Confucianism does not oppose gender equality in and of itself and that some of the perceived
sexism within the passages can be reexamined through alternate translations for more context
(Koh 361). Koh also argues that within Confucian texts during the Joseon Dynasty, female
authors wrote texts to help women achieve as much gender equality as possible; although, as
much gender equality as possible is a far cry from full gender equality (ibid. 358). Operating
within a male-dominated framework, some women in Joseon Dynasty Korea were able to attain
a semblance of power, albeit small and conforming to traditional gender roles, but a return to
pure Confucianism as Koh suggests would require a full return to ancient Confucianism in order
to escape the sexism that has tainted Confucianism (ibid. 361).

I argue that even through this lens, wherein Confucian texts have been purposefully
corrupted to further ingrain sexist ideologies in Korean society, dislodging the sexist ideologies
without completely subverting Confucianism to fit the demands for gender equality in the
modern era would almost be impossible since the texts have become the embodiment of the idea. With centuries of this continual, incessant subjugation of women there would be no way to return to the altruistic, pure Confucianism because, as seen throughout this thesis, women who have challenged the patriarchy and sexism are met with resistance and challenges in every aspect.

The three aspects of culture that this thesis focuses on are crucial to understanding the underlying experiences of women because they are representative of the everyday challenges faced by women as they struggle for a fair place in society. In order for true change and progress for women’s rights to be made, the changes need to permeate through every layer of culture, not just governmental or legal changes. I aim to answer the central questions underlying all three of these aspects: What forms of and resistance to gender inequality can be seen in the areas of law, language, and sexuality? What role has Confucian heritage played in the establishment of and continuance of gender inequality in these realms?

**Literature Review**

For this section, I will be surveying the existing scholarship surrounding feminism in South Korea and challenges it faces. This portion of the thesis is divided by topic as they appear in this thesis, that is, law, language, and finally sexuality and focuses on key pieces of scholarship within these realms. By dividing the literature review this way, the cross-theoretical approaches to these topics will demonstrate where research and scholarship has been focused and where gaps exist in the literature to this day.

Most existing scholarship on legislative change brought about by feminist activism and women’s movements surrounds the controversial Family Head Law, as the abolishment of this law was a victory for feminists and women’s rights activists. Kim and Kim take a straightforward and
feminist approach in *The Korean Women’s Movement and the State: Bargaining for Change*, where they recount the process of abolishing the family head law through efforts of feminist groups, particularly the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MGEF). Kim and Kim discuss three specific laws that the MGEF and feminist groups had a part in enacting or abolishing: The Act on the Prevention of Sexual Traffic and Protection, etc. of Victims Thereof, the Family Head Law, and the Healthy Family Law and Childcare Policy. Kim and Kim detail the importance of feminist groups and the MGEF in these groundbreaking legal decisions and conclude that the progress towards gender equality in South Korea was a culmination of progressive presidential administrations and the efforts of feminists and the MGEF. Kim and Kim provide a wide overview for several pieces of landmark feminist legislative efforts, whereas other sources take a similar approach but focus on one law.

Despite copious literature on women’s rights and women’s struggles for equality in modern South Korea, little scholarship focuses on how the Korean language acts as a driving force in the perception of women. Some literature exists regarding gendered language in Korean, but the gender differences are often attributed to complexities within the language (Y. Cho 196). In more recent times, the phenomenon of Korean feminist “mirroring” has spawned scholarship on how this language has revitalized the feminist movement through playful activism in the online sphere (Jeong 323-324). Referred to by Jeong as “troll feminism,” the new generation of feminists formed in online communities like Megalia, the group that first employed mirroring as a strategy against online misogyny, but these communities are not limited to the online sphere (ibid. 326-327). Jeong’s research found that Megalia has not only drawn women to the online “troll feminist” aspect of feminism, but also to become active in feminism in the real world outside of the internet and represents recent trends in scholarship regarding feminism and the
Korean language (ibid. 327). Jeong’s research presents an in-depth view of the mirroring phenomenon and provides insight into how the Megalia movement came to fruition, becoming a popular method for feminists to oppose male misogyny in the online space, whereas few other sources focus in detail on the mirroring phenomenon and its connections to the Korean feminist movement.

Women’s sexuality has been a common subject of interest to scholars. Focus has been placed on women’s chastity and sexuality during the Joseon Dynasty; however, within the past twenty years, more scholarship has begun to focus on the modern era and the continued beliefs surrounding women’s chastity and sexuality. Shim’s “Feminism and the Discourse of Sexuality in Korea: Continuities and Changes” provides a comprehensive look into the development of women’s sexuality and chastity up to the early 2000’s (Shim 133-134). Shim concludes that there remain competing ideologies and contradictions regarding women’s sexuality and chastity due to continued Confucian influences, but she acknowledges that feminists have used the conservative Confucian beliefs in order to gain power and work within the existing power structure to enact change (145-147). The foundation of Shim’s argument is that sexuality is a socio-historical concept that has been utilized within Korean culture as a means of subjugating women until the feminist movement began to challenge these ideals widely (133-134). Shim’s article was groundbreaking and one of the first pieces of literature on Korean women’s sexuality and chastity in the twenty-first century and is integral to understanding the constructions of female sexuality and chastity within South Korea. Shim’s approach is blatantly feminist and takes a staunch anti-Confucianism stance, while many other sources tend to approach Confucianism as being sexist with the caveat of some semblance of female power when they conform to Confucian gender norms.
My argument for this thesis builds upon these sources and explores laws, language, and sexuality in more depth in order to provide a fuller picture of Confucian challenges to modern-day feminism.

Methodology and Chapter Outline

This thesis incorporates the arguments of previous scholars’ books and articles in tandem with primary sources including blogs and images to provide a more holistic view into the feminist movement and its challenges in South Korea. The goal of this thesis is to demonstrate how, in the realms of law, language, and sexuality, women’s rights continue to face opposition and to analyze what the causes of the pervasive inequality and anti-feminist mindset are with a particular focus on Confucianism and its lasting impact on modern-day South Korea.

In "Law and (Dis)Order,” I will outline the progress of legislation that increases women’s rights, while also looking at the reasons for opposition in order to determine how Confucian groups and other forces oppose such legislation. In "Talk Demurely to Me,” I will describe how aspects of the Korean language are sexist, with regards to words used in reference to women and how women are spoken about. I will draw on both native Korean and Sino-Korean words to demonstrate the link between Confucianism and language. This chapter will also detail how feminists are fighting back against sexist language and reclaiming power through language. "Bringing Sex(ualit)y Back” discusses the double-bind situation in which women find themselves entrenched, between the ideologies of women’s sexuality and women’s chastity while carefully analyzing the underlying beliefs that shape these ideologies and thus lead to women’s oppression. "Fight for Your Right to Equality,” the conclusion of this thesis, will seek to make connections across domains and provide areas in which change is still needed for women’s rights.
Chapter Two

Law and (Dis)Order

In order for full gender equality to be reached, institutional level changes must be enacted. Without changes to the sexist power structures that dominate society, progress is unattainable because without the structures changing, the mindset and ideas cannot be changed either. However, the current laws in place in South Korea and some historical laws that were abolished only recently are insufficient in achieving the overarching goal of gender equality. The goals of this chapter are two-fold: the first goal is to outline intended progressive legislation for women in South Korea, and the second is to describe the merits and shortcomings of said legislation. While I will discuss the results of the South Korean presidential election and its implications for women in South Korea in terms of equality in the conclusion, this chapter will provide insight into the election’s importance in terms of gender equality legislation by focusing on two laws that have been abolished and one law that remains in place. The main questions of this chapter are as follows: what legislation has been passed to benefit women’s rights and promote equality? How have these laws contributed to women’s equality, whether through their repeal or through their enactment? How have Confucian groups supported or denounced certain laws, and what does that reveal about the importance of Confucianism to South Korean society?

The first section of this chapter focuses on two bills that were passed at the same time, one of which is still in effect to this day. These bills are the Adultery Bill (Article 241 of the Criminal Act) and the Monthly Physiologic Leave Bill (Act 73 of the Labor Standards Act) (“Criminal Act,” “Labor Standards Act”). These two bills were passed in 1953 due to initiation by Park Sun-cheon (박순천) (Soh 81). One of these criminalizes adultery, with penalties of imprisonment up to two years, and the other allows for one day off per month by request for
women for menstrual pains, respectively ("Criminal Act," “Labor Standards Act”). I will start by giving the historical background to the Adultery Bill before explaining its importance and later abolition.

their wives violated the “seven offenses” (or “seven evils”), also known as �fila거지악 (chilgeojiak), which included adultery, but only if a woman committed the act (J. Kim 10). The “seven offenses” were based in Confucian discourse surrounding the “proper” way for women to conduct themselves (J. Kim 10). Meanwhile men were allowed to have extramarital affairs and even concubines and their wives could not even show displeasure at their husband’s extramarital affairs, lest it show jealousy—another one of the seven divorceable offenses (Soh 81). When Pak presented the bill in 1953, it faced backlash from male legislators because it would punish men (Soh 81). However, this punishment for men would not be an attack on men, but rather it granted women the equal right to sue men in the case of adultery (J. Kim 10, Soh 81). Divorce for women prior to their entry into the workforce would have meant social ostracization and financial ruin, as women were financially dependent on their husbands during the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) until the colonial period, when women entered the workforce as factory laborers (Barraclough 3). In 1948 women were given equal rights when South Korea formally became the Republic of Korea and afforded women equal opportunities to their male counterparts (Korean Overseas Information Service).1 However, as seen through newspapers of the time, the law had to be altered to pass, and one of the main ways it did so was through lobbying by Confucian groups (Delman, Choe, "Adultery").

1 While women were “officially” granted equal rights at this time, women still faced and continue to face discrimination in the workforce (Patterson and Walcutt 20).
Prior to the Adultery Bill’s passing, the current law of the time only punished women and was in danger of being abolished because the law was found to be unconstitutional according to Article 11 of the Constitution Of The Republic Of Korea due to its only punishing women (“刑法典草案,” “女子만의 처罰對象은 違憲,” “Constitution of The Republic of Korea”). In the original law, women would only be punished for adultery if they themselves were married, which indicates the judicial system only concerned itself with the adultery of married women because women were subject to their husband. However, the new law introduced by Pak Sun-Cheon stipulated that both genders could be punished and sued for adultery (Soh 81). The law was then passed in part due to input and lobbying by Confucian groups (Delman). From the Confucian perspective, the law was meant to maintain the family and promote a Confucian social order (ibid.). These two articles imply that the law only passed after being altered to punish both men and women and supported by Confucian groups.

At the time of its passing, newspaper outlets discussed the controversial law relatively neutrally, although the Dong-A Ilbo (동아일보) stated that even in the legendary figure Zhiang Liang, known for his victory in war over nearly impossible odds, could not even get the bill passed by the National Assembly (양, 女子만의 處罰對象은 違憲). This indicates that even newspaper reporters did not believe the law could be passed, demonstrating the amount of pushback this law received both within and outside of the National Assembly and is reflected in the margin by which the law passed, a mere three votes even with the altering of the law to punish both men and women (Soh 81).

Article 241 of the Criminal Act stated that the maximum penalty for adultery was two years imprisonment for both the spouse who committed adultery and their affair partner (“Criminal Act”). However, the spouse committing adultery could only be prosecuted upon
complaint by the “victimized spouse,” meaning that if the faithful spouse permitted or forgave the adulterer, then charges could not be filed (“Criminal Act”). This act in particular was granted to women despite the gender-neutral wording of the law, in both Korean and the English translation. Therefore, this law was specifically proposed for the purpose of elevating women’s status so that marriages could be ended by either party and men would have to face legal consequences for their unfaithfulness. Since men traditionally held more economic and social power, if adulterous men were charged and faced legal consequences, women would be able to gain more from divorce proceedings (Bothelo and Kwon). By granting women more leverage, women were not forced to remain in unfaithful marriages in order to be financially secure.

The Adultery Bill was overturned in 2015 because of the social progress in South Korea. At the time, the president of the country was Park Geun-Hye (박근혜), a woman, albeit one who was later impeached in 2017. Due to the social progress women had made in the sixty years since the law was enacted, seven of the nine judges deemed the law no longer necessary because women no longer solely relied on their husbands economically (Bothelo and Kwon). However, with continued discrimination in wages, women may not solely rely on their husbands, but they are still economically weaker, and divorce affects women more than men financially, as the gender wage gap in South Korea in 2020 was 31.5%, compared to the total of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which was 11.5% (OECD). While women are financially independent, the lack of equality in gender wages causes more strain on women than men.

While the law started out as progressive legislation put forth by a woman, prior to its repeal, Confucian groups subverted the purpose of the law to suit their family-centered narratives and promotion of a Confucian social structure. Women’s groups supported the law’s
abolishment because of its ineffectuality and saw the abolishment as legislative proof that women were progressing past the need for this type of legislation (Choe, “Adultery”). The Confucian group Sungkyunkwan, one of the main supporters of the law, said that the court’s decision was “deplorable” (Choe, “Adultery”). The Confucian social structure defines women as inherently lesser than and subservient to men, so by supporting this law, Confucian groups were not seeking to promote women’s rights, but rather women’s subjugation (Poceski 46). Over time, the Adultery Bill’s meaning has changed, and while it began as a beacon of female empowerment in a male-dominated world, it has come to signify the continuance of Confucian familial values. The law’s repeal demonstrates how Confucianism is losing some of its legal influence on the South Korean government.

The second part of the law put forth by Pak Sun-Cheon is the Monthly Physiologic Leave Bill, which is Article 73 of the Labor Standards Act (“Labor Standards Act”). Pak initiated the bill in 1953, and until 2003, menstrual leave was paid (Soh 81, ४). Now, women are guaranteed menstrual leave, but they must request it. This means that female workers must expose personal health information in order to obtain permission for unpaid time off for health condition which can lead to further discrimination and sexist ideologies about female workers (L. Chong).

The English version of the law is relatively vague, stating that “[e]very employer shall, when any female worker files a claim for a physiologic leave, grant her one day of physiologic leave per month” (“Labor Standards Act”). Physiological or physiologic refers to “characteristic of or appropriate to an organism's healthy or normal functioning,” and if one did not know that the actual law is for menstrual leave, it would seem as though women get one day off per month for no reason (“Physiological”). In contrast, the Korean version of the law is called “menstrual

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2 These groups, however, do support the “moral and ethical responsibility” of adulterers being held accountable (Choe “Adultery”).
leave,” and states that “upon request by a female worker, employers must give one day of
d menstrual leave per month”3 (“근로기준법”). The Korean version of the law uses a word that
means both “physiological” and “menstrual,” saengni (생리), which simultaneously
acknowledges women’s menstrual cycles while still being vague.

The negative perceptions, specifically of associating women with weakness, that arise
surrounding women who utilize their rights to menstrual leave also deter women from requesting
and using menstrual leave. Female workers know that if they take menstrual leave, their male
coworkers especially will continue to see women as weak, with some men even viewing the law
as reverse discrimination (Jung et al., Pattani). With women already facing discrimination in the
work force, using menstrual leave can further notions of inferiority and provide tangible
evidence that women are less valuable in the workforce. Some female workers feel guilt when
taking menstrual leave because their workload is given to other employees, thus making others
do extra work (Jung et al.). As a result of these factors, the use of menstrual leave in South Korea
has steadily been falling, with only 19.7% of women using it in 2017, a decrease of nearly four
percent from 2013 (Hollingsworth). Despite this law being in place to provide women medical
leave for menstrual pains, feminist groups do not discuss this law, which implies that the law is
so ineffective that feminists and women’s groups do not wish to engage with it. While intended
to protect women and provide accommodations for them due to their menstrual cycle, the
Menstrual Leave Act falls flat by presenting women with a choice: either take the leave and
further stigma surrounding women in the workforce, or disregard their constitutional right to
time off, both of which are undesirable options.

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3 사용자는 여성 근로자가 청구하면 월 1 일의 생리휴가를 주어야 한다 (“근로기준법”).
Rather than menstrual leave, South Korea could expand the general health leave available to workers without forcing workers to disclose why they need the leave. With a more expansive health leave policy in place, women would not have to disclose personal health information to their employers, and men would not feel discriminated against, thus creating a more balanced and equal healthcare policy in the workplace.

In comparison to the previous two laws I have discussed, I will now discuss one law that feminists caused to be overturned due to its sexism. The family-head system and family head law are both complex laws with an even more complex history, one that I do not go into depth about in this thesis⁴; however, I will provide a brief historicization of the family-head system and family head law before discussing the abolishment of the law due to feminist activism and the impact the abolishment had on South Korean society.

The family head system, or 호주 제도 (hoju jedo) was based on Confucian ideology and codified in law under Japanese colonialism of Korea (Kim and Kim, *The Korean Women’s Movement* 66-68).

As Kim and Kim define it:

The family-head system established a legal head for each family, defined the family in terms of the family members’ relationships to him, and gave him authority over his family. Only males were eligible to become permanent family heads and the position was passed down through blood line by patrilineal descent. When the family head died, his position was taken over by his eldest son, even if that son was an infant, so that a woman’s status

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⁴ For a more in-depth analysis of the historical background to the family-head system and the subsequent changes to the family head law leading to its abolishment, see Erin Cho’s “Caught in Confucius’ Shadow: The Struggle for Women’s Legal Equality in South Korea” and Hyunah Yang’s “A Journey of Family Law Reform in Korea: Tradition, Equality, and Social Change,” full citations can be found in the bibliography of this thesis
was always dependent on her connection to a male. While the symbolic subordination of women was a key part of why the women’s movement objected to the family-head system, it also had many material implications through its connection to issues of ownership and inheritance of property (ibid. 66).

Under the family-head system in its original law, women were always categorized hierarchically underneath a man in their life, even a child which indicates that gender remains a key factor in determining one’s power within the familial unit. Such patrilineal patterns of inheritance are reminiscent of the “Three Obediences,” a traditional Confucian teaching for women. This teaching states that women should be obedient to three men throughout the course of her life: her father as a daughter, her husband as a wife, and her oldest son following her husband’s death (Park and Lee 118-119, Poceski 210). As a result, feminists argued against the law on the basis that the family-head system perpetuated the Confucian patriarchal structure and oppressed women.

While the family-head system was legally codified under Japanese colonization, in 1957 the bill for the Civil Code, including the family head law, was passed, and in 1960, fifteen years after the end of Japanese colonization, a new family-head law was enacted that continued the Japanese family head system enacted during the colonization of Korea (Yang, “A Journey” 78, 89). Even before the bill for the Civil Code was passed, Korean feminists and lawyers opposed the family head law (Yang 78). Through the resilience of feminists, lawyers, and women’s groups and their incessant demands for change since the bill’s inception, the law was revised three times, in 1962, 1977, and 1989 before ultimately being abolished in its entirety in 2005 (Kim and Kim, The Korean Women’s Movement 67). Up until the law’s abolition, Confucian

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5 While the family-head system was abolished in 2005, it did not take effect until 2008 (Kim and Kim, The Korean Women’s Movement” 87).
groups continued to rally behind the law and support the family-head system, which contributed to the controversy surrounding the law and its eventual abolishment.

With the history of the family-head system and family head law established, I will now explain both sides of the argument: the Confucian groups’ support of the law and the feminists’ condemnation of it before discussing the abolishment of the law.

Confucian groups supported the family-head system in order to maintain the traditional structure of South Korea. One of the fundamental focuses of Confucianism is on social harmony and the maintenance thereof (Poceski 44). One of the ways to maintain social harmony comes within the familial structure. Confucianism also employs a hierarchical system encompassed by the five relationships, one of which being husband and wife⁶ (ibid. 45). These five relationships place one person in a dominant role and one in a subservient role. Women are only mentioned in the context of being wives and being subjugated to their husband. Therefore, the family-head system continues the patriarchal pattern set forth by Confucian ideology which explains in part why Confucian groups vehemently rejected the abolishment of the law.

In order to defend their opposition to revisions or the abolishment of the law, these groups emphasized how the family-head system was “a beautiful custom” encompassing traditional Korean values (Kim and Kim, The Korean Women’s Movement 67). However, these claims by Confucian groups of “beautiful customs” and the importance of the family-head system to maintaining the Korean family unit could not be proven in recent history (Yang, “A Journey” 79). The majority of the Confucian groups’ arguments toward retaining the family-head law relied on outdated and unfounded claims with an appeal to the importance of reclaiming Korean culture following the end of colonization (ibid. 90-91). Confucianism’s power within the

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⁶ The other relationships are ruler/subject, father/son, older brother/younger brother, and friend/friend (Poceski 45).
legal and governmental sphere became significantly weakened with the abolishment of the family-head system.

For similar reasons Korean feminists and lawmakers opposed the family head law. Feminists viewed the law as continuing patriarchal structures that oppress women and that directly oppose Article 36 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea (Kim and Kim, *The Korean Women’s Movement* 69, “Constitution of The Republic of Korea”). The Korea Women’s Association United (KWAU), a feminist organization that worked closely with the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MGEF) to pass feminist legislation, renewed their efforts to abolish the family-head law by collecting testimonials from women who had faced hardships because of the family head system (ibid. 76).

Some of the overarching problems of the family head system included:

1. pressure to have a son to succeed as the family head;
2. a divorced and remarried woman cannot change her children’s surnames to that of their stepfather;
3. a woman who gives birth to a child out of wedlock cannot register her child under her own family registration if the father of the child acknowledges the birth; and
4. visible and invisible discrimination against women in property ownership because of the family-head system (Yang, qtd. in Kim and Kim, *The Korean Women’s Movement* 76).

Thus, the Korean public became more aware of the specific reasons that the family-head system harmed women’s civil rights.

In 2005, after nearly fifty years of fighting for the abolishment of the family-head system, the family-head system was found unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court, who then advised the National Assembly to pass a bill that would fully abolish the family-head system (Yang, “A Journey” 88, Kim and Kim, *The Korean Women’s Movement* 86). The stipulations in
the amended civil code included the ability for children to take on the mother’s surname, the allowance for children to take on a stepfather's surname (with approval from a family court), and the change from the “prohibition on marriages between individuals with the same surname and same ancestral seat” to “a prohibition of marriage between members of the same lineage” as well as the abolition of a period after divorce or widowhood for women (Kim and Kim, *The Korean Women’s Movement* 86-87). These changes fundamentally changed the structure of the South Korean family from a rigid, patriarchal structure to an equal one, where wives control as much as their husbands.

The Family Head Law’s abolishment did not necessarily come as a result of feminist logic and consistent protests, however. Feminists also exploited the idea of the family-head system being “traditional” Korean culture by emphasizing the system as being adopted from Japanese colonialism, wherein Japanese colonial powers forcibly implemented Japanese values upon Korea, one of which was the family-head system (Yang, “A Journey” 91). By pressing the issue of “traditional Korean culture” being tainted by colonial influence, feminists caused male lawmakers to become more amenable to altering and altogether abolishing the Family Head Law as a form of post-colonial strength (ibid. 90-91). Therefore, while the Family Head Law’s abolishment was a win for feminists, its abolishment was not necessarily a purely feminist win, but could be attributed to other factors as well.

With the family head law being completely overturned, the South Korean judicial system and the government significantly diminished Confucianism’s position of power in South Korean laws. The abolishment of the family-head system was a grand achievement of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MGEF), but it could not have been done without the activism of feminist groups from the introduction of the family head law into the original Civil Code. With
the repeal of the family-head system, one of the most deeply engrained patriarchal structures came crumbling down, paving the way for more equality for women.

The first two laws discussed in this chapter were aimed at improving women’s status in South Korea through legal means, while the final law was aimed at keeping women in subservient positions. By providing equality-focused legislation, women would be provided with equal opportunities to their male counterparts at the highest level of Korean society which would then expand to society at large. However, despite the intentions for some laws to protect and enhance the status of Korean women, some did the opposite by furthering prejudices against women or providing other avenues through which men contained power over women, specifically in marriage. Despite this, some laws that were abolished provided women with more freedom and power within society and thus serve as an example of the success of feminism. The Confucian influence on laws that blatantly oppress women is diminishing in the governmental sphere, meaning that awareness about the harms of Confucian ideology continues to spread, meaning that in the legal sphere Confucianism does not hold the same power as it once did. The next step after passing legislation that benefits women and abolishing laws that oppress them is for the general mindset of Confucian ideology to change in the general population.
Chapter Three

Talk Demurely to Me

This chapter begins with a brief overview into the history of hangeul (한글), the Korean writing system. Building off of the base established by this history, I will examine how the modern Korean language perpetuates sexism and contributes to the oppression of women through kinship terms, male as norm language, gendered slurs, and aegyo (애교).

Despite hangul’s creation in 1443, which King Sejong created in order to better reflect the Korean language and so that the uneducated and women would be able to read and write, hangul was not uniformly adopted until the early twentieth century (Schmid 65). Prior to this nationwide adoption of the language, hangul was viewed as “women’s language,” and in Joseon Dynasty Korea, where women occupied an inferior position, hangul was seen as less refined and less important than classical Chinese in part because of hangul’s lack of prestige (Jisoo M. Kim 46). However, Korean women in the Joseon Dynasty did use hangul to petition the king, where traditionally Chinese script was used (granted, after the petitions were heard, they were transcribed to Chinese, but the fact that hangul itself was allowed at all for women’s use and was seen as valid is notable in and of itself) (Jisoo M. Kim 43, 46). Hangul’s initial use as “women’s language” and the belief of the upper classes of hangul as inferior was later repurposed as a source of nationalism in 1895 (Schmid 65). This standardization demonstrates the appropriation of women’s language as being a national pride that all Koreans should use to show their support for their country. In narratives about hangul and its origins, oftentimes the original use of hangul as women’s language is left out or ignored altogether.
Even in Korean today, Chinese characters continue to have an influence, with Sino-Korean vocabulary often being seen as higher-level vocabulary than native Korean terms. The continued prevalence and prestige of Sino-Korean indicates that the Sino-Korean vocabulary is still held in esteem to the present day in South Korea. Further, it indicates that because of this esteem, the traditional Confucian values that were transported via language retain their importance subconsciously. One such instance of the continuance of Confucian principles being demonstrated in language is in familial or kinship terms. The words for the wife’s family, after she has gotten married, has the prefix 외- (“oe-”) before the familial term, meaning ‘outside’ (Sohn 192). The prefix for the paternal side, 친- (“chin-”), means “true, real, by blood” but is often omitted (“친-”). This prefix can also be found in words like 친하다 (chinhada, “to be close to”) and 친절하다 (chinjeolhada, “to be kind”) which indicates that the prefix chin-conveys a meaning of closeness (“친하다,” “친절하다”). When considered in conjunction with the family head system, referring to the maternal line as being “outsiders,” the patriarchy is reinforced within the familial sphere. Furthermore, the importance placed on the paternal line, when taken in context with other Confucian-based ideals, like one of the seven reasons a man can divorce his wife being her disobeying her parents-in-law, indicates that the father’s line was seen as the more important line and therefore his side of the family was the “real” one (Soh 81). While the natal family of a woman has more involvement in their daughter’s life post-marriage compared to previous generations, the continued use of “oe-” and “chin-” intrinsically maintains the level of distance between not only the daughter and her natal family, but her children as well. An alternative to these prefixes could be to use the first syllable from the words for “mother”
(어머니, eomeoni) and “father” (아버지, abeoji), that is “어-” (“eo-”) for the maternal side, and “아-” (“a-”) for the paternal side, thereby eliminating the notion that one side of the family is the “true” side while also equalizing both sides of the family.

Another example of Confucian practices prioritizing women’s relationships to men can be found in the family register, which functions as a biographical record of a particular family. When a woman is married, she is added to her husband’s family register, and while a brief record of her and her marriage remains on her natal family register, she is seen in relation to her husband, rather than her husband being seen in relation to her family on their register (Lee and Park 32). The way that a woman is defined as relational to a man on her own family register demonstrates yet another form of the patriarchal structure, thus prioritizing a woman’s relationship to a man over her blood relations.

Women in South Korea are often referred to as “(child’s name)’s mother,” rather than by their first name. The de-identification of a woman from being an individual with her own name to merely being a child’s mother demonstrates the importance placed on motherhood in South Korea. While men are also referred to by their parental status (i.e., (child’s name)’s father), their parental status does not define their identity as robustly as motherhood does for women. By referring to a mother by her child, she is seen in relation to her child rather than the opposite. While in some contexts, referring to a woman as her child’s mother is reasonable, referring to her in all situations as her child’s mother strips away her individual identity.

In order to understand male as norm language, one must first understand androcentrism and its effects on language in order to comprehend the full picture. Bailey et al. define androcentrism as “a societal system organized around men and evident in both individual biases
and institutional policies,” and was popularized by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1911 (308). In other words, androcentrism can be thought of like a storm. Men are in the eye of the storm, where the weather is calm, representing the privilege and way in which men are catered to by both people and institutions at large, and women (and transgender and nonbinary individuals) are in the periphery, where the weather is more volatile, representing the difficulties women face and the struggles they must endure because they are underprivileged and are not the focus of society.

Part of androcentrism lies in the language use surrounding humans. In English, for example, “man” can be used to refer to all humans, regardless of gender, even though the word “man” itself refers to male humans in particular. By extending the use of “man” to mean “person,” the meanings then become reciprocal, where “person” refers to a man unless otherwise stated. Therefore, when one speaks about a woman, she is more overtly identified by her gender because men are seen as “more typical” than women (Smith and Zárate 13, Bailey et al. 307). In Korean, this same concept applies as well. In occupational terms, for example, in words like 사장 (sajang, “company president, chief executive officer”), the base form is meant to be gender neutral. However, in order to specify that one is speaking about a female in this job position, the prefix 여- (yeo-, “female”) is conventionally added to form 여사장 (yeosajang), meaning “female company president.” While there is a male prefix equivalent, 남- (nam-, “male”), it is often not used in occupational terms to denote gender (Y. Cho 191). Therefore, when a woman is

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7 Since this thesis focuses on women, I will not be discussing the struggles of gender minorities here. This is not to downplay or minimize the struggles of gender minorities, but rather maintain the focus and scope of this thesis.
in a job position, her gender is marked because this occupation (among others) has typically been male dominated, demonstrating androcentric language in the professional sphere.

One example of women protesting the ways they are spoken to and about can be seen in the image below. This image, a poster created by a feminist study association called Wol-kyung (월경) at Sungkyunkwan University (성균관 대학교). This image has the question, “Why do we have to hear these words?” (“우리는 왜 이런 말을 들어야 하지?,” “이게 되어 보이지는 않는데 왜 간간히 они” in red overlaying statements in a faded gray that say sexist things like “as a woman, how can you do that?” and “this kind of work should be done by a man!” (월경). The statements on the poster call women slurs, call them “socially weak,” and contain homophobia, with one question asking a woman if she is gay because she is not interested in the (male) speaker asking the question (월경). Meanwhile, some of the statements are praising men, saying things like “all men are wolves,” which indicates that men being players or predators are seen as a good thing because they have the ability to get what they want, which not only ignores female consent but also objectifies women as objects to be taken (월경). This image not only brings attention to the sexist language used, but also emphasizes the way that this language makes women feel. It also questions why women must allow this language to continue when it is clearly harmful. This image was circulated in 2013, indicating that sexist language continues to be a modern issue that is prevalent among all age groups.
Fig. 1. The poster from Sungkyunkwan University’s feminist study group Wolkyung. This image questions why women have to listen to sexist language and provides examples of sexist statements heard by the students (월경).

Internet slang used to degrade women runs rampant on Korean forums and other forms on online media. Such terms as kimchi-nyeo (김치녀, meaning “kimchi girl”) and doenjang-nyeo (돈장녀, meaning “soybean-paste girl”) are used against women who are deemed materialistic or not conforming to the ideal of what a woman “should be” and how she should
spend her money according to Korean society, while men face less criticism of the way they choose to spend their money (Lee Y.). Meanwhile, when radical feminist groups such as Megalia employed “mirroring,” as discussed at the beginning of the introduction, society labels women as misandrists when they used the same language against men to emphasize how commonplace misogyny is, but men are not called misogynists for the same language (Seo and Choi 382). The purpose of this mirroring, however, was not merely to parrot back misogynistic statements made against women, but rather reflect misogyny as a whole (D. Kim 155). Therefore, when women were called misandrists, it revealed the injustice of misogyny tenfold, as “a mirror only reflects the original” (D. Kim 155). Megalia’s and other feminists’ mirroring strategies demonstrated the hypocrisy of branding only women as sexist for language that was originated by men.

Before discussing the real-life impact of gendered slurs against women, I would like to first talk about Megalia and radical feminism in South Korea. Radical feminism originally aimed to “end male supremacy in all areas of social and economic life and rejected the whole idea of opposing male and female natures and values as a sexist idea” (Willis 91). However, in the modern day, radical feminism is associated with TERFs (Trans-exclusionary radical feminists) leading to feminists moving away from that label towards intersectional feminism, “intersectionality” having been coined by Kimberle Crenshaw. Furthermore, radical feminism also tends to be viewed as misandry because radical feminists’ goal is to completely restructure society and rebuild an egalitarian society wherein gender does not matter rather than making progressive changes (i.e., legislation, changes in attitudes) that lead to long-lasting egalitarianism (Lewis). This is seen as misandry because some men perceive the radical restructuring as an attack on men and proof that feminists hate men. What Megalia did through mirroring is considered misandry and radical feminism in South Korea because they did not take traditional
routes of attempting to enact change—which, as seen in the previous chapter, as a way of making progress for women, was not as successful as it could have been. While Megalia was not the best organization, employing controversial tactics and partaking in harmful behavior themselves, such as the “outing”\textsuperscript{8} of gay men married to women by some users, Megalia’s goal was to confront misogyny in the online sphere through drastic measures (M. Kim; Jeong 20). While some people, including feminists, may argue that the techniques employed by Megalia were not helpful, Jeong argues that younger women were drawn to the feminist movement because of Megalia’s tactics and the way these tactics “challenge[d] the gendered reality… Their practices of disturbing the gendered order extended the areas of experimenting into material reality” (21). Furthermore, this online activism bled over into everyday life for many women who would not have interacted or become involved with feminism if not for Megalia and the blatant way the organization outright challenged misogynistic language (Jeong 21).

While such words may not seem to cause harm, the use of gendered slurs against women feeds misogyny and supports the notion that such name-calling and derogatory words are acceptable. These words also demonstrate a double standard where women are unjustly and overly criticized, whereas men do not face nearly as much criticism. The backlash to mirroring, when terms are gendered towards men, and the immediate banning of those words indicates that online users and website owners recognize the harm of these terms, but only care when they are used to prove a point against men.

\textsuperscript{8} Outing refers to the practice of forcibly revealing a sexual or gender minority’s identity without the individual’s consent. Outing is not only invading one’s privacy by forcing an individual to share a personal part of their identity, but it can also be dangerous for the individual, who may be at risk for discrimination or even violence solely because of their sexual or gender identity (Schwartz et al.; “Glossary”). Outing anyone is not a feminist value and is not condoned or supported by the author; however, in order to accurately depict Megalia, both the positive and negative sides must be shown.
Women also face more consequences for even indirectly supporting groups like Megalia that employ women, like Kim Jayeon, who was a voice actress for Nexon, a video game company. Kim wore a shirt from a Megalia group that stated, “girls do not need a prince,” and posted about it on social media. When the origins of the shirt were revealed, men demanded that the voice actress apologize for supporting a male hate group, and Kim was then let go from her job, but both the company and actress claimed that the parting was on mutual terms (M. Kim).

Gendered slurs such as these have real-world consequences for women, as they perpetuate the belief of women’s inferiority and can lead to real-life consequences, including violence. One example of blatant violence against women stemming from a hatred of women comes from the Seocho-dong public toilet murder case of 2016. This murder case took place near a Gangnam subway station, in a bar restroom, where a man waited for a woman to enter the restroom and proceeded to stab her to death (Han and Kim; B Kim). The case was ruled a crime caused by mental illness despite the obvious misogyny driving the perpetrator, who said that he targeted a woman because he “had often been looked down on by women” (Ock; B Kim).

Mental illness and misogyny are not mutually exclusive concepts, and while the perpetrator showed signs of schizophrenia, blaming his misogyny on his mental illness is harmful to people with schizophrenia and also allows him a way to escape culpability.

When women began to protest the blatant gender violence both in this case and in South Korea as a whole, men came to the protest with signs that read “not all men are potential murderers” and “the crime was not misogynist” (Ock). While saying that it is not all men is a factual statement, it derails the conversation from the oppressed, in this case women, who suffer violence by men and attempts to invalidate their experiences. Because men are not subjected to the sexism and misogyny women face, they are able to look at the case without considering
gender, whereas women always consider their gender, in part because of the effects of androcentrism—women are seen as deviations from the norm and therefore see themselves as their gender in addition to other attributes.

This murder case is only one example of how harmful language leads to patterns of thought which can lead to violence against women, and the language utilized by men following the murder further proves that many Korean men see no problem with sexist language and do not see the connection between sexist language and violence against women. In these cases, many Korean men are more concerned with being painted as misogynistic and violent than with how their language contributes to the problem or holding their fellow men accountable for the harmful rhetoric they use against women. In doing so, these men completely disregard the real-life consequences that women face because of sexist language and gendered slurs, in that the language men use allows for toxic beliefs about women to fester and can lead to bodily harm against women in the most extreme cases.

Aegyo (애교) refers to a style of speech or acting that is comparable to “baby talk” in English, albeit aegyo is more widespread and common in usage than baby talk. Aegyo is used for requests, favors, and in order to appear charming in interpersonal interactions, as aegyo demonstrates a layer of closeness between the speaker and listener (Puzar and Hong 333-335). Furthermore, Puzar and Hong assert that aegyo can be used to softly reject “social obligations [and demands]” in order to maintain “social ‘harmony’” (337). In these contexts, aegyo, which is more commonly used by women, maintains the patriarchal structure as the onus is on women to maintain social harmony by using aegyo to avoid hurting someone’s (namely men’s) feelings, whereas if the situations were reversed, men would rely on “common politeness” to avoid social
conflict (Puzar and Hong 337). Aegyo is used as a tool for women to operate within the patriarchal structure in order to achieve social achievements and avoid social conflict.

Aegyo itself, while described as “performed winsomeness” by Puzar and Hong (336), is more comparable to acting innocent or childlike. When taken in context with the ideal Confucian woman, who is pure and chaste⁹, aegyo can be seen as epitomizing the ultimate form of innocence: a child. While aegyo in and of itself is not fetishizing children and should not be thought of as such, it should be noted that by acting childlike or innocent, women are seen as charming and may benefit from it in their personal and professional lives by making themselves more likeable to their superiors, namely those who are male, according to qualitative research done by Puzar and Hong (341). Aegyo is perceived as a useful asset for women in order to navigate patriarchal spheres that can provide women with a small semblance of power to navigate situations in which they are otherwise powerless.

Aegyo is not only utilized in the work sphere, but also in the romantic and even sexual sphere as well. Aegyo has been noted as potentially being sexualized within the context of intimate relationships, as a form of performing for the other person in the relationship.¹⁰ While more often than not, women are the ones performing aegyo in these circumstances, men can also use aegyo within the context of an intimate relationship (Puzar and Hong 342-343). One feminist (who remained anonymous in a blog post) wrote that she had been surrounded by “rude and discriminatory marks” from people, including her romantic partner ([Preview]). She later said that one of the things she heard was “women are a bit coquettish, so you must know how to show

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⁹ For more on this subject, see chapter four: “Bringing Sex(ualit)y Back.”

¹⁰ For this thesis, I will only be focusing on heterosexual relationships, but it should also be noted that there is a distinct lack of scholarship on aegyo in gay/lesbian relationships.
aegyo to your boyfriend”¹¹ ([Preview]). This quote indicates that even within romantic relationships, where the people within said relationship should be able to completely be themselves without putting on a persona in order to have effective communication, there is an expectation of aegyo because of the belief that women play coy, which is unattractive and confusing to men. This quote also shows that society puts emphasis on the woman to use aegyo towards her boyfriend in order to ease his understanding of what she means and to appeal to him, rather than putting emphasis on emotional intelligence for both parties.

However, aegyo is not always perceived as positive, with one person stating that “[the use of aegyo is] like saying ‘I’m innocent, I’m cute, so you must help me do everything’. It’s like putting oneself into extreme passivity, and that is not good,” which demonstrates that some people in South Korea do see aegyo as being damaging to the image of women in society because it furthers the belief that women are weak beings that need help (the underlying notion being that women need help from men) (Puzar and Hong 344).

While aegyo can potentially be viewed as a way for women to exert some semblance of power by working within the existing power structure, overall aegyo puts women in a situation in which they must “have aegyo” and perform in such a way that is pleasing to men, with some men even believing that they have the right to demand a woman do aegyo for their benefit (Puzar and Hong 344). Women are categorized as either having aegyo or not having aegyo, defining them through a characteristic that, while may directly benefit them through the outcomes, the act itself does not benefit women, it is typically done for men and to appease the male gaze.

¹¹ Translated from Korean: ‘여자는 내숭도 좀 벌고, 남자친구한테 애교도 부릴 줄 알아야지.'
One blog post, titled “The Aegyo Way of Speaking: How Should I Do It[?]” (“애교말투: 어떻게 할까요[?]”), talks about aegyo as something that “most people like [aegyo] regardless of their likes and dislikes;[12] however, throughout the blog post, images that show people only have women in them (더하기蚜용). This suggests that while aegyo is said to be enjoyed by most people; not all who are expected to do aegyo enjoy it. It should be noted that aegyo seems to be used less in all female-environments, like all female universities in South Korea, according to early research by Puzar indicating that aegyo is performed by women for the male gaze (99).

When the idea of aegyo is examined in the context of Confucian ideals for women, which were for women to maintain their chastity and purity[13], the idea of aegyo then becomes a way to embody the ultimate form of purity—a child. Therefore, aegyo can be seen as a means of perpetuating the ideal Confucian woman through language, actions, and expressions.

Sexist language in regards to women still exists in Korean, even in more formal spheres, and is demonstrably rooted in misogyny in the online sphere. While techniques used by some feminist groups to oppose misogynistic and sexist language have been controversial, these techniques have brought attention to the rampant misogynistic language throughout Korean society, especially online. Overall, the Korean language has entrenched and reinforced values of Confucianism as a means of controlling how women and their biological family are viewed, as well as to subjugate women through the use of a hierarchical structure. Women have been seen as deviations from the norm, as exemplified through androcentric language as well as gendered

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[12] Translated from “귀여운 애교말주도 가진 사람은 호불호에 관계없이 대부분 좋아하기 합니다.”

[13] For more information, see Chapter 4: “Bringing Sex(uality) Back.”
occupational terms, which contributes to the lack of awareness by men surrounding blatant misogynistic language. Since language is used every day by every person, these structures are unavoidable and demonstrate that even on a subconscious level, women are viewed as being inferior to men.
Chapter Four

Bringing Sex(ual)ity Back

A traditional Korean proverb states “a woman’s mouth is a cheap thing,” but in the modern age in South Korea, the price for sexual misconduct is high, and men are paying the price for the revelations of sexual abuses due to the surge of the #MeToo Movement (CCIES 934).

This chapter focuses on women’s sexuality and chastity in South Korea, and how these two constructions compete with each other and subsequently oppress women. First, this chapter will define women’s sexuality and how it has changed over time. Next, I will define women’s chastity and focus on the value of sexual purity and its oppression of women’s desires and pleasure. Following these two sections, there will be a discussion of how these two competing constructions place women in a double-bind situation, wherein they cannot simultaneously uphold societal ideals of sexual purity and pursue their own sexuality. Furthermore, I will discuss how men utilize these constructions to exert control over women’s bodies and how women have fought to take back this control, including information on sexual violence and the #MeToo Movement. Finally, this chapter will conclude with answering the following questions: how much does Confucianism still influence these constructions of sexuality and chastity in the modern age? And what other forces are contributing to these constructions as well?

Throughout the Joseon Dynasty, it was not uncommon for men of higher ranks to take concubines or secondary wives. These wives were often used for the husband’s pleasure,

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14 This chapter focuses on cisgender heterosexual women’s experiences, specifically in regards to sexuality due to the detail that this thesis can feasibly maintain. This does not diminish or negate the struggles of LGBTQIA+ people in South Korea, as same-sex marriage, partnerships, and civil unions are still not recognized in South Korea (“Diversity, Access, & Identity”). In regards to sexual violence, “women” is used to refer to women and people assigned female at birth, regardless of sexual orientation.
although some were used to continue the family line (Shim 135, Han 134). No such equivalent wherein women had multiple husbands existed. There were also “entertainment houses” for men’s pleasure, but there were none for women (Shim 135-136). The societally accepted male entertainment houses and lack of female entertainment houses serves as an early example of the sexual double standard, wherein men are able to freely express their sexuality while women are not.

In the modern day, couples are able to decide when they wish to have children, and mothers of the husbands are expected to pay for postpartum care. This change in familial dynamics serves as a subversion of Confucian values, specifically of filial piety in the realm of child-rearing. Instead of the mother-in-law, whom a wife is supposed to serve, making decisions about her son’s family, the wife is making the decisions and the mother-in-law is financially serving her son’s family (Kang 380, 393). Kang further asserts that South Korea is shifting from a matriarchal-centered to wife-centered patriarchy and that despite wives gaining more power within the home, gender roles are still not challenged often, allowing the patriarchal structure to remain intact, albeit altered with women attaining more power for themselves (381). While this structural change does not in and of itself demonstrate changes in the views of women’s sexuality in regards to pleasure, it does demonstrate that slowly changes regarding female autonomy over the expansion of her family and control over procreation are taking effect, allowing for women to control when her sexuality leads to a child.

Traditionally, the primary purpose of sex was procreation.\(^{15}\) In modern times, with the rise of feminism and visibility of sexual minorities, women have felt more empowered to seek

\(^{15}\) It should be noted that in order to carry on the family line, a male heir was preferred, as daughters would be moved to their husband’s family register upon marriage and could only inherit property in the event there were no eligible males to inherit property. As discussed previously, the Family Head Law was in effect from 1953-2008 (Koh 346).
their own pleasure and begin to speak more openly about sex as active participants. Women have also begun to sexually empower themselves by opening and patronizing adult stores that cater to women, contrasting the previously established ones that cater to men (Haas, “If the Sex is Bad”). These stores opened in part because of relaxing restrictions on the importation of sex toys in 2015 (Y. Lee, “A Look Inside”). By opening women-centered shops for sexual pleasure, women are beginning to deconstruct the stigmas not only surrounding women’s sexuality, but also stigmas surrounding sex toys and sexual pleasure.

In contrast to the expansion of women’s sexuality, the value of female chastity, the idea that women should maintain their virginity at all costs until they become wives, remains a fixture of South Korean society. In the Joseon Dynasty, one of women’s main values was chastity, as it demonstrated their purity and devotion to their husband (Shim 136, 138). Meanwhile, their husbands were often not reciprocating that same loyalty and purity (ibid.). Women were not supposed to remarry after becoming a widow, and even if widows circumvented this and did remarry, they would not have the same rights as primary wives, creating another deterrent of remarriage (Shim 136, Deuchler 192). Even in the modern age, especially in older people’s beliefs, chastity remains an important value for women to maintain.

While younger people may not hold chastity in the same regard, the people, both men and women, who are in political power are able to pass laws that prohibit all-encompassing sexual education in schools. This leads to misinformation and sexism being spread to younger generations. For example, one guideline in 2015 for high schoolers states that “[f]emales sexually respond to one specific male, whereas males can have sexual intercourse extensively
with women they are only sexually attracted to,” which is both false\textsuperscript{16} and implicitly promotes chastity (Haas, “Blatantly Sexist”). By telling girls that they should only be sexually attracted to one man, who will presumably become her husband, she would be led to believe that she should not “waste” her sexuality on someone she does not feel sexually attracted to. In comparison, boys are almost encouraged to “have extensive intercourse” because it is natural for them to behave in such a way. Incorrect and inadequate sex education has far-reaching consequences including potential sexual exploitation and dangerous sex practices (“Why Comprehensive Sexuality Education Is Important”).

Another way in which the chastity ideology negatively impacts women is through adultery. As of 1991, approximately twenty percent of Korean men had committed adultery, the majority of whom committed it after marriage, while only about two percent of Korean women committed adultery, most of whom committed it before marriage (Shim et al., qtd in Shim. 138). With the prevalence of the sex industry catering to male customers combined with most Korean male adulterers claiming to have strong marriages, the reason for the majority of these cases of infidelity appears to be linked with sexual gratification. However, over half of the Korean population claims to not support adultery, although men committing adultery was more acceptable than the opposite (ibid.). This reveals that even when a woman’s chastity is maintained, her husband may still seek sexual relations outside of the marriage. Therefore, one can conclude that a woman’s chastity is a construct meant to belong to her husband, but she does not receive the same in return.

\textsuperscript{16} Ahn et al. finds that approximately two-point-five percent of Korean women have had casual sex partners in a twelve-month span across ages eighteen to sixty-nine (370).
Two competing constructions of sexual values that impact primarily women constitute South Korean society. With the chastity ideology being favored by older generations, public policies, and societal norms, women are expected to save their virginity until they are married. This ideology forces women to ignore their own desires for fear of social repercussions and judgment should the knowledge of their impurity become known. However, men are not held to the same standard, as seen with guidelines for sex education. Men’s lack of chastity and sexual promiscuity is seen as a badge of honor and just a part of male nature, demonstrating that women are the ones who are mainly subjected to the strict chastity ideology (Shim 137). With these two ideologies defined, the following sections will focus on the consequences of these ideologies for women, particularly in regards to sexual violence, and how the feminism and the #MeToo Movement have contributed to progress for women in South Korea.

The chastity ideology turned women’s bodies into objects to be given to their husbands as a sign that they belonged to their husbands. In the Joseon Dynasty, if a woman were to become unchaste, her prospects and value would significantly decrease, making it difficult for her to find a worthy match. In the context of the Joseon Dynasty, where women were limited in what property they could own, marriage was crucial (Han 126). In cases of rape, women were seen as dirty and impure, regardless of how the fact that they were not at fault. Women, then, were faced with few options: they could lie about the assault, they could be forced into marriage with their rapist, or, in extreme cases, they may even commit suicide, particularly if they were of the upper class (Shim 136-137).

These extreme responses to sexual assault have decreased in recent times, leading to more progress in women’s rights. As of 2001, almost seventy-five percent of college-aged women stated that they would not conceal their assault, indicating that women were already
feeling more empowered to report their sexual assaults before the #MeToo Movement gained momentum (Shim 143). Beyond 2001, there have not been mentions of women being forced to marry their rapist, indicating that this phenomenon is occurring far less frequently, if at all. While the former two extreme responses seem to be occurring less often, some women still commit suicide following a sexual assault due to the trauma and pressure from society to protect the perpetrator.

This is especially common in military contexts, such as in the case of Master Sargeant Ye-Ram Lee, who committed suicide two months after she was sexually assaulted by her male colleague. Master Sargent Lee faced considerable pressure from her male military colleagues to not report the assault and even attempted to conceal the assault, which is often what happens to women in these situations (Choe, “The Only Exit”). Cases like Master Sargent Lee’s are not uncommon, with at least four other women in the military having committed suicide following sexual assault in the last eight years (ibid.). Many women in these fields do not report their assault because of the harassment and ostracization they know they will face from their peers, in addition to the unlikelihood that disciplinary action will be taken against their assailant, rendering reporting the assault not worth the harassment (ibid.) The continuance of these suicides in the wake of sexual assault in a male-dominated field demonstrates that despite the #MeToo Movement and Korean activists advocating for victims, some portions of society are lagging behind—particularly those with closer ties to patriarchal structures.

Before discussing the #MeToo Movement, I will discuss a smaller form of public calling out made by the Korean feminist organization UNNInetwork (언니네트워크, eonninetewokeu). UNNInetwork is a grassroots feminist group that aims to provide a sisterhood for women in a male-dominated society. ‘Unni’ (언니, eonni) refers to an older sister of a
younger female; however, in Korean society it can be used amongst friends as well as one’s real family, in relationships where one woman is older than another, but they are close friends. In this way, UNNInetwork is a community where younger and older girls and women are able to interact and learn about feminism, self-defense, and a safe space for all women, regardless of race or sexual identity. UNNInetwork hosts self-defense classes, feminist book discussions, and forums for discussion. From 2006 to 2011, the organization gave out mock awards in an award ceremony called “Mouths We Want to Sew Up” (꼬매고 싶은 입, kkomaego sipeun ip). These “awards” were given to politicians, celebrities, and other public figures who said sexist or misogynistic things (UNNInetwork). These “awards” called attention to the sexism of higher profile people and made fun of them by giving them an “award” for being sexist. The irony of “awarding” someone for being sexist draws attention to the issues women face in a humorous way.

There are three “levels” of awards: 본드 상 (bondeu sang, meaning “superglue award”), 대바늘 상 (daebaneul sang, meaning “big needle award”), and 재봉틀 상 (jaebongteul sang, meaning “sewing machine award”) (꼬매고 싶은 입). These awards vary in severity, with “superglue” being given to the least offensive statements to “sewing machine” being given to the most offensive statement. In correspondence with the severity of the sexist statements, superglue being the least painful and solid way of attaching things together versus a sewing machine, which is the strongest and arguably most painful method if one were to have their lips sewn shut.

17 꽔매다 “to sew up” (kkomaeda) is a dialect form of the standard 땁매다 “to sew up” (kkwemaeda) (열정쌤, “Teacher Yeol-Jeong”).
In the image from the 2009 “Mouths We Want to Sew Up” Awards on UNNInetwork (see below), the three recipients are pictured like cutouts, almost like a magazine article detailing winners of prestigious awards, the irony being that these men are being called out for sexist statements. Additionally, these men are in suits and even clothing resembling graduation robes; clothing typically worn in nicer, more formal settings. These choices in images are meant to demonstrate that even people in higher level occupations are using sexist language. The contrast between the formal attire and the mock awards being given to these men creates a comedic effect by placing the image and text at odds with each other. UNNInetwork pointed out statements made in public by high-ranking officials and celebrities, they only covered statements made in public, rather than personal incidents.

Figure 2: An image of the three “winners” of the three “Mouths We Want to Sew Up” Awards from UNNInet. From top to bottom: Lee Myung-Bak, recipient of the Sewing Machine Award,
Hong Gwang-Sik, recipient of the Big Needle Award, Park Beom-Hun, recipient of the Superglue Award (“Image of UNNInetwork’s 코매고 싶은 입 (Mouths we wish to sew up) 2009 Awards”).

In contrast to the #MeToo Movement, the examples given by UNNInetwork were not personal experiences and were from speeches and statements which may have contributed to why the mock awards ceremony ended, as it was not generating a massive public outcry against sexism perpetuated by public figures. The #MeToo Movement brought about the public reckoning of incidents happening in private in South Korea. Seo Ji-hyun’s bravery brought the #MeToo Movement in full force to South Korea in 2018. Two years earlier, the hashtag “#my_sexual_abuse_in_00” (“#00_내_성폭력,” “#00_gye_nae_seongpongnyeok) provided an anonymous platform for Korean women to share their stories of sexual violence on the Internet and receive support from fellow survivors, setting the stage for a catalyst to bring awareness to the unspoken of sexual abuse in South Korea. When Seo Ji-hyun, a prosecutor, revealed that she had been repeatedly groped at a funeral by a senior male colleague and subsequently demoted to an obscure position outside of Seoul following her report of the incident on JTBC, a Korean cable news channel, she became that catalyst (Kim H. 244, Haynes and Chen). Throughout the interview, Seo Ji-hyun remains composed, despite her obvious discomfort as she seems to lean slightly away from the interviewer, who is male ([인터뷰] 1:23-1:47). While recounting her sexual harassment, Seo describes the event in a straightforward manner without much outward emotion, even while her voice shakes (ibid. 5:10-5:20). Seo’s lack of expression of her emotions does not necessarily connote a lack of emotions, but rather
Seo realized that showing her emotions would likely raise criticism and accusations of Seo just being emotional. Furthermore, despite her discomfort, Seo addresses victims of crime and other sexual assault survivors, saying “I came here because I wanted to tell victims [of crimes] and sexual violence victims, it is never your fault. It took me eight years to realize that”18 (ibid. 3:35-3:49, translation mine). The prosecutor’s story sparked public outcry, and, one year after her fateful interview, her senior prosecutor, Ahn Tae-geun, was sentenced to two years in prison (Choe, “Ex-Prosecutor”). Seo’s story sparked a revitalization of Korean women publicly sharing their sexual assault and abuse stories and pushing their voices to be heard at the forefront of society.

The popularity of the #MeToo Movement in South Korea illuminated the multitude of sexual abuses Korean women had been facing for years in a public sphere, including harassment, illegal filming, and assault, and provided a space where they could publicly share their experiences and receive support from fellow survivors of sexual harassment and violence. The #MeToo Movement was a victory for feminists as it gained national attention to women’s sexuality, which has been a key part of the feminist agenda in South Korea and forced the country to confront the numerous sexual abuses that women were suffering (Kim H. 244-245, 256). Inspired by Seo Ji-hyun, women have been coming forward with their stories, which has resulted in men in powerful positions stepping down, or in some cases, even facing prosecution (Shin 507-508). The #MeToo Movement has been successful in bringing to light the abuses women have faced and is beginning to get justice for the victims and survivors of sexual assaults.

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18 “이 자리에 나와서 범죄 피해자... 분들께 그리고 성폭력 피해자 분들께 결코 당신의 잘못이 아니다. 나는 것을 얘기해 주고 싶어서 나왔습니다.”
Rape myths, including victim-blaming mentality, wherein the person who was assaulted, harassed, etc. is told that they are at fault for their attack still remains a deterrent against survivors coming forward, and also leads to victims internalizing this mentality as well. One statement from the 2015 National Standard of Sex Education passed by the Ministry of Education for the education of high school students states: “[F]rom the perspective of a man who spends a lot of money on dates, it is natural that he would want a commensurate compensation from the woman. In such conditions, unwanted date rape can occur” which essentially tells girls that they are only being dated for their bodies, which is dehumanizing, that it is their fault if they are date-raped, and boys are entitled to their bodies in return for paying for a date (Haas, “Blatantly Sexist”). Victim-blaming can make survivors unwilling to come forward to report further abuse (“Rape Culture”). The younger that mindset is engrained, the harder it is for that person to change their mindset. The #MeToo Movement has helped amplify the voices of victims of sexual assault, abuse, and violence, but how victims are viewed needs to change in order to provide an environment where victims are heard, believed, and supported.

The main questions of this thesis chapter are: To what degree does Confucianism impact modern-day constructions of women’s sexuality and chastity? How have Korean feminists challenged these notions in the modern day? As seen throughout this chapter, Confucianism still affects modern constructions of sexuality and chastity for women, albeit to a less blatant degree than earlier in Korean history. Although, the attitudes towards traditional thoughts on women’s sexuality and chastity are changing to be more progressive and less Confucian in nature. However, long-held beliefs still linger, as Confucianism remains deep-seated and older generations, who still maintain power to determine public policies, continue to support education regulations that emphasize female chastity, and society at large still maintains a conservative
viewpoint. However, women continue to push back against these notions through disrupting the norm, whether it be through sex shops for women or survivors of sexual assault coming forward as part of the #MeToo Movement. Constructs of sexuality and chastity still exist in South Korea, but women continue to fight to reconfigure these notions for a more egalitarian society.
Conclusion

Fight for Your Right to Equality

Throughout this thesis, I have focused on three realms of gender inequality and the feminist resistance thereto in South Korea in the realms of law, language, and sexuality, along with the ways in which these realms link to Confucian heritage. Much of what I have discussed involves information from the early 2000s to the 2010s, but this conclusion will focus on the importance of feminism in modern South Korea, specifically in terms of the recent South Korean presidential election and the implications thereof. I will then discuss the continued impact of Confucianism on women’s rights and feminism.

South Korea’s most recent election was March 9th, 2022. Leading up to the election, one of the hot button issues discussed by the two frontrunning candidates, Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열) of the People Power Party and Lee Jae-myung (이재명) of the Democratic Party, was gender inequality, particularly in relation to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MGEF) (Draudt, “The South Korean Election’s Gender Conflict”). Yoon, now the president-elect, stated his intentions to completely disband the MGEF because the organization is “outdated” and agreed with sentiments that the ministry is no longer needed because South Korea has achieved gender equality (김). Throughout this thesis, I have proven that this statement is unequivocally untrue, not only through data like the gender wage gap but also in more subjective ways, such as the beliefs behind women’s sexuality and the relationship between women and aegyo. Yoon’s blatant attack on the MGEF was a calculated one to appeal to the disgruntled young men of South Korea, the self-proclaimed anti-feminists who believe that men are oppressed because of feminism (Choe, “The New Political Cry”). These young men believe that gender equality has been reached in South Korea, so the protections and policies that are meant to afford women
more opportunities to be equal in a society that has been male dominated are seen as unnecessary and serve as a form of discrimination against men (Choe, “The New Political Cry”).

One valid criticism these men have is in regards to the mandatory military service all men aged eighteen to twenty-eight must serve (Kim and Lee). Anti-feminists argue that men are disadvantaged in the workforce following their military service; however, these men do not acknowledge that women in their mid-thirties and later are unable to advance in their career because of the expectation to bear children, and many women drop out of the workforce after becoming mothers (Kim and Lee, Choe, “The New Political Cry”). Rather than draw attention to their discontent with mandatory military service and lack of job opportunities, anti-feminists blame women because of the visibility of the feminist movement and work of organizations like the MGEF.

With Yoon Suk-Yeol's election, the fears of women and feminists have become realized. Yoon’s anti-gender equality rhetoric leads to real consequences for women in a society where they are already disadvantaged socially, economically, and politically. Furthermore, by promoting the rhetoric of anti-feminists, Yoon is tacitly supporting the misogynistic views they espouse which encourages anti-feminists to continue their counter protests and spread harmful ideas that lead to real world consequences for women, not unlike the DC Inside situation as discussed in the introduction to this thesis.

The findings of this thesis demonstrate that Confucian influence still remains in Korean society at large, but it does not answer why such beliefs continue to be upheld in a nation that claims to promote gender equality, nor how to effectively eradicate the sexist beliefs upheld by Confucianism in a modern context with cultural sensitivity. More research on language and Confucianism could reveal further biases beyond the scope of this thesis. Other researchers may
also consider the beliefs fueling the anti-feminist movement in South Korea and its connections to Confucianism as well.

While on an institutional level, Confucianism does not hold as much power as it once did, the beliefs about women still linger. A lack of effective legislation and strong enforcement of gender equality legislation allows for women to continue to be disadvantaged, especially in the workforce, exacerbating the need for the MGEF. However, of the three spheres I discussed in this thesis, the legislation realm had the most progress, with sexist laws being overturned, and a specific law for women’s health remaining in the Labor Standards Act. Most of the Confucian norms that directly marginalized women has been removed from the Korean legal system, weakening Confucianism’s influence on the state and legal policies. However, these laws would not have been overturned (or passed, as the case may be) if not for the consistent protests and oppositions put forth by feminist groups and the MGEF. In the legal sphere, Confucianism does not affect women’s rights compared to the past; however, gender inequality still persists within the law and its enforcement.

The Korean language contains engrained notions of the patriarchal order ascribed by Confucianism and is overall androcentric. Furthermore, the importance of aegyo as a marker of a woman’s feminine charms establishes the importance of performed gender roles in public. With feminist groups employing the mirroring technique, they bring attention to the prevalence of gendered slurs. In the online sphere, women can be more direct without facing as much consequence compared to in real life if they were to speak up. In terms of language, the online sphere is a space where feminists can fight back against misogynistic language, but in the outside world, the Korean language continues to contain sexist elements that contribute to the idea of women’s inferiority.
Compared to earlier Korean history, Korean women’s sexuality has become a more spoken about topic, but stigma and taboo still surround women and their sexuality. Especially among the younger generations, the shift from traditional ideas of female sexuality and chastity to more open ones is becoming more clear; however, older generations continue to retain the traditional female sexuality ideals and can affect public policy as lawmakers. Finally, the #MeToo Movement has provided Korean women with the empowerment and support needed to publicly hold men who have committed sexual harassment or assault accountable on a global and easily visible stage.

This thesis sought to delve into the incessant challenges feminism and feminist groups face in modern day South Korea and the resistance thereof in the realms of law, language, and sexuality. The research I have conducted has filled gaps in the existing research for Korean women’s studies and studies on Confucianism in South Korea by combining law, language, and sexuality, and specifically introduced connections between Confucianism, the Korean language and sexism. By analyzing law, language, and sexuality, this thesis has demonstrated the explicit and implicit ways in which gender equality continues to be opposed in South Korea.
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