[page 71]

**Women in Korean Politics**

Chunghee Sarah Soh, Ph.D.

First, I would like to explain my professional interests and personal background briefly to give you some idea as to the disciplinary approach and the research questions I deal with.1 Then, I will mention some specific facts about the women members in the national legislature of the Republic of Korea.

As an anthropologist, I have a wide range of interests, which might be classified into three categories: 1) social and cultural change, 2) social stratification and inequality, and 3) various dimensions of human growth and development.

Korea has undergone a tremendous degree of social and cultural change since the turn of the century, and I think that Korean society lends itself well to the study of the dynamics and processes of change and continuity in various dimensions of social life. The representation of women in national politics at the elite level, I believe, is an important indicator of women’s changing roles and status in society.

My work on women in Korean politics may be regarded as an attempt to understand the processes of change in the gender roles and relations in the political arena. It is not a study of Korean politics per se. Rather, it uses gender as an analytical tool, to throw light on various aspects of modern Korean society: the characteristics of the political elite and of the Korean political culture; the inner workings of the national legislature; the dynamics of changing male-female relations.

I should mention here that in the women’s studies literature, it is important to distinguish the term gender from the term sex. Gender may be defined as cultural constructions of sex-appropriate temperament, social roles, and relations for males and females. Although gender differences derive from biological differences between the sexes, they vary cross-culturally and across time. [page 72]

For example, weaving can be women’s work in one culture while it can be men’s work in another. Historically, premodern Korea had three female heads of state during the Silla dynasty (57 B.C.-935 A.D.). The appearance of these reigning queens was due to the “bone-rank” (kolp ‘um) institution,a unique status system that regulated a variety of special privileges according to hereditary bloodline. Since the social status distinction came before the gender or sex differences in the kolp’ um system, Silla royal women were able to succeed to the throne in the absence of qualified male heirs.

The bone-rank system disappeared with the demise of the Silla dynasty. Several queens of the Koryo and the Yi dynasties, however, were able to enter the political arena as mothers of minor kings. As for the women of the commoner class, the first opportunity to participate actively in national politics came during the Japanese colonial rule as fighters for national independence. I will talk more about this a little later during my slide presentation.

What I should mention here is that a major assumption of my study is that socio-historical forces are ultimately responsible for the patterns of female participation in politics.

Many of you must have noticed by now that Korea is a very status-con-scious, male-dominated society. Traditional Korean society was characterized by the contrastive traditions of the yangban (the upper class) and the sangmin (the commoner class) cultures. Contemporary Korea, in my opinion, is also characterized by a dualistic social structure, but the content of the duality has shifted, of course. The dual contradictory sets of values and norms derive from the traditional Confucian principles of hierarchical social relations on the one hand, and from the Western democratic ideology of egalitarianism on the other. The tension between the democratic idealism of equality and traditional authoritarianism, I believe, generates a host of social issues and conflict.

As far as gender roles and relations are concerned, South Korea may be referred to as a “patriarchal democracy,” where the ideology of male superiority coexists with the liberal-democratic principle of sexual equality.

Let me just indicate here that men and women tend to follow what I have called a compartmentalized gender schema. That is, in order to handle the contradictions of the dual gender-role ideologies, they compartmentalize the social arena into public versus private spheres and formal and informal situa-tions within each sphere, and alternate the guiding principle of gender relations in accordance with the situational variations and their good nunch ‘i (savoir faire or tact).

When a women legislator joins her male colleagues for an informal din- [page 73] ner, for example, she is expected to exercise her good nunch’i and leave the gathering sometime after the meal so that men can entertain themselves freely without the inhibiting presence of their female colleague.

If she does not do so, what would happen? She is likely to be criticized for being a woman without nunch’ i (nunch’ i omnun yoja). One informant told me during our interview that some men would half-jokingly suggest the departure time for their married female colleague by reminding her of her duty to look after her husband, the “kun aegi” (big baby), at home.

Nunch’ i, which literally means the eye measurement, I think, is one of the most important concepts to understand the patterns of Korean behaviors. Having good nunch’ i means one is quick to adapt to the changes in situational factors. The term nunch’i is used in a wide range of social situations such as the application procedure for a college entrance examination, parent-child and other hierarchical social relations, and in economic transactions as well.

Let me now mention a few specific things about the nature and scope of women’s participation in Korean politics. Since politics has been traditionally a male occupation, under-representation of females in politics seems a universal fact. The low participation of women and their underrepresentation in political life may be demonstrated by the minuscule percentage of women in national legislatures, executive cabinets, and chief executive offices across nations,2 and Korea is no exception.

The membership of the first National Assembly (1948-50) consisted of 199 men and, guess how many women: one woman, Yim Yong-sin who was known as Louise Yim among her foreign friends. The fourteenth National Assembly, which convened in 1992, has 295 men and 4 women. This represents an increase from 0.5% to 1.3% in the percentage of women’s representation in the national legislature from 1948 to 1992.

I should point out here that there have been two types of legislators since 1963, when the proportional representation (PR) system was adopted in the recruitment system of the legislators. In the current fourteenth National Assembly, for example, four-fifths of the members were elected by popular vote, whereas the remaining one-fifth of the legislative seats were distributed proportionately among political parties that had won five seats or more in the direct election.

In my study, for purposes of comparison, members of the former group are referred to as “elected legislators”and those of the latter group as “appointed legislators.” Appointed legislators are often perceivea in a negative light by the public, owing to the indirect method of their election by the party leadership.3 [page 74]

It is important to underline here the implications of the two categories of women legislators for the basic differences in their attitudes toward and skills for political careers. The majority of the appointed women legislators may be regarded as passive political appointees. In contrast, all elected women legislators and several appointed women legislators (mostly partisans) belong to the category of political women 一 women who possess the desire and necessary skills to seek positions of jural authority, wield significant influence in the decision-making processes of public life, and actively seek continued participation in power processes.4

In addition to the mode of recruitment, differences in historical circum-stances and motivational factors among women legislators further separate them into the pioneer- and second-generation legislators: those who became legislators before the “May Sixteenth Military Revolution” of 1961,5 and those who became legislators after it.

Women legislators of the pioneer generation began their political involvement under Japanese rule, with the March First Independence Movement of 1919,6 and continued their political participation in post-liberation Korea.

Women legislators of the second generation—except for three—are appointed members of the National Assembly, and the majority of them did not voluntarily seek active political participation. In most cases political socialization followed their appointments to the legislature. For the three elected women legislators of the second generation, intense personal experiences of major political events after liberation (particularly, the internecine civil war, known as the Korean War) motivated their lifelong commitment to political careers.

My research on women in Korean politics began in 1985—following the election of the Twelfth National Assembly (1985-8). Fortunately, there were two elected women as well as six appointed women in the 12th National Assembly. In contrast, there has been no elected woman member in the 13th nor in the current 14th National Assembly.

A total of 46 women found their way into the National Assembly between 1948, when the National Assembly was first inaugurated, and 1992, when the last general election took place. Fourteen of them have served for more than one term. Of these multi-term legislators, seven were elected and another seven were appointed to the National Assembly. Among the 46 women legislators, five have also served as cabinet ministers. Under the cir-cumstances, the question I raise in my research is not, “Why do women not participate in politics?” but rather, “How and why did these few women [page 75] become involved in the male bastion of politics at all?”

To answer the question concerning the motivations for and processes of the participation of women in national politics, I conducted in-depth inter-views with both former and incumbent women legislators and analyzed their life histories. In my book, I described their personal backgrounds such as their family, gender-role socialization, education, religion, and marriage, and also situate the individual variables in the particular cultural background and the historical circumstances of Korea and of the world at the same time. Let me briefly mention some major findings about the pattern of their career development.

The pioneer generation of women politicians came from the ranks of Christian women who were educated during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945). They found their first opportunities to be directly involved in political activities during the March First Movement in 1919. They were pulled into the resistance movement against the Japanese. The process of the emergence of political women in modern Korea, therefore, is best understood in the context of the larger process of the resistance against Japanese rule, especially the March First Movement (Samil Undong) of 1919, which proved to be the turning point in the lives of the women legislators of the pioneer generation. These women experienced imprisonment due to their participation in the independence movement, but continued their participation in the resistance, risking their lives to help bring liberation of the country from Japanese rule. After liberation, they were appointed to high office in the Rhee administration and were elected to the National Assembly.

While various episodes in the career development of elected women leg-islators intimate extraordinary difficulties for women candidates to win leg-islative seats, an overwhelming majority of second-generation women became appointed legislators owing to their accomplishments as successful professional women in such fields as college teaching, journalism, medicine, performing arts, and women’s organizations.

There are many interesting elements in the life histories of women legis-lators, which reveal, for example, the importance of the father s influence on the daughter’s psychosocial development, and the role of Christianity in the modernization processes in Korean society.

[page 76]

NOTES:

1. Women in Korean Politics is a second edition in paperback published by Westview Press in 1993. The original hardcover edition was published under the title of The Chosen Women in Korean Politics: An Anthropological Study by Praeger Publishers in 1991.

2. Randall (1987); Sivard (1985).

3. Darcy and Song (1986: 683) state that the attitudes developed during the Park regime toward the members of the Yujonghoe carried over to the subsequent National Assembly, despite “a very different basis” of the election under President Chun. However, it should be pointed out that since both Presidents Park and Chun, as the top decision makers, fully exercised their authority in recruiting the legislative members at large, the ‘‘different basis” of their recruitment under President Chun was more formal than substantive. For further discussions of the negative perceptions of the PR system by the general public, see Chapters 6 and 7 of Soh (1991; 1993).

4. For an extended definition of “political women,” see Kirkpatrick (1974: 217-18).

5. Koreans often use dates in naming sociohistorical and political events, such as Samil (Three-One, i.e., the March First) movement, Yuk’ io (Six-Two, i.e., the June Twenty-Fifth) war, and Oilyuk (Five-One-Six, i.e., the May Sixteenth) military revolution.

6. For details, see Chapter [page 77]

REFERENCES:

Darcy, R.,and Sunhee Song. 1986. Men and Women in the South Korean National Assembly: Social Barriers to Representational Roles. Asian Survey 26 (6): 670-87.

Kirkpatrick, Jeane J. 1974. Political Woman. New York: Basic Books. Randall, Vicky. 1987. Women and Politics: An International Perspective.

Second ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sivard, Ruth L. 1985. Women: A World Survey. Washington, D.C.: World Priorities.

Soh, ChungHee S. 1991. The Chosen Women in Korean Politics: An Anthro-pological Study. New York: Praeger.

 . 1993. Women in Korean Politics. Second edition of Soh (1991).

Boulder, Colo.: Westview.