

# Confucian Historical Narratives and Misogynic Culture in South Korea

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## Abstract

President Yoon Suk-yeol's campaign for the presidency embraces the anti-feminism movement that has further fueled the misogynistic culture in South Korea. South Korea is quite thick with patriarchy and misogyny because there is a lot of criticism of women, especially feminists. This article analyses the phenomenon of misogynistic culture in South Korea using document-based research and internet-based research techniques. It employs Foucault's discourse of power and the concept of misogyny to analyse the impact of history on misogynist culture in contemporary South Korea. The findings show that as Confucian teachings are the basis of state ideology in South Korea, Korean society believes in the chastity of women. In the Korean history, a negative connotation was given to women who are considered to have damaged the country's 'Joseon-ness' and the standard of femininity in South Korean society. Given South Korea's high level of sexism and low level of female empowerment, the representation of males in dramas as caring and empathetic is unfortunately not representative of the real world. Sexist behaviour in South Korea is founded on Confucian ideology.

## Key Words

South Korea, misogyny, Confucian, history, discourse, power-knowledge, sex

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## **Introduction**

This article analyses colonial history's impact on South Korea's misogynistic culture. South Korea is a country in the East Asian region widely known for its popular product, K-Pop. K-Pop itself has become the main icon of South Korea in promoting the country's identity, with girl groups or boy bands that have managed to steal the world's attention from K-Drama, which is synonymous with the romantic genre. Men in K-Drama are characterised as very gentle so it is a dream for female viewers to get a man like in the show. Nevertheless, in reality, men in South Korea behave the opposite of that depicted in K-Drama. This can be seen from the many misogynistic actions based on the notion that men are the owners of the nation and women are the cause of the nation's crisis (Sojeong 2017).

The issue of gender equality has become a worldwide concern and has slowly given women the rights they deserve. However, in South Korea, the anti-feminism movement is rapidly growing. Men in South Korea view the special rights granted to women as unfair in addition to being misogynistic, which has existed since antiquity. One such right is that men must serve in the military while women do not (Bicker 2022). In early 2022, Yoon Suk-yeol of the People's Power Party (PPP) won the presidential election by using the anti-feminism movement as the main backer, attracting men who were inferior to women as the main political force. In his campaign, Yoon argues that the Ministry of Gender Equality should be abolished because men are considered 'potential sex criminals,' and he links the feminist movement to the low birth rate in South Korea (Gunia 2022). When Yoon becomes president of South Korea, it will be the hardest thing to do to ensure that men and women have the same rights.

The majority of Korean feminist organisations were founded in the 1980s. The anti-military regime democratisation movement had a crucial influence on creating an autonomous women's rights movement (Şener 2019). However, feminist groups existed before this decade, and until the late 1980s, they were scattered across many civil society organisations. In 1987, the Korean Women's Association United (KWAWU) was founded, giving feminism in South Korea its first institutional shape. Nonetheless, throughout this decade, feminist organisations prioritised democratic change above their agendas. Following democracy, women's rights groups began advocating for distinct legislative objectives. In the context of shifting political and social dynamics, they attacked various problems, including laws on sex crimes, the gender pay gap, the double shift of burden, and patriarchal parts of family law (Lee and Chin 2007). Despite

improvements in legislative regulations, a cultural context that supports the maintenance of gender stereotypes inhibits significant institutional change. For instance, the Equal Employment Act was enacted in 1987 to promote wage parity and employment opportunities for women (Şener 2019).

In conjunction with marriage and childbearing, women's labour force participation levels decline substantially in their 30s (OECD 2012). A work environment characterised by long hours and a lack of adequate childcare options make it difficult for parents to maintain employment. Cultural factors also encourage this gender-based division of labour in the nation, on the assumption that women are the primary carers in the family, mothers are expected to remain at home throughout their children's early years (Chang and England 2011). These tendencies are seen unfavourably by recruiting managers, who do not prefer to invest in employees who are likely to leave their jobs. Moreover, according to 2021 figures, South Korea has the largest gender salary disparity among the 45 OECD nations, at 31.1% (OECD, 2022). Such institutional issues are the primary preoccupation of feminist organisations today.

All this has raised questions as follows: What made this misogynistic culture in South Korea? I assume that Korean history contributes to the formation and insistence of misogynistic culture despite the country's incredible advancement in modernity and technology within the last decades. A country's culture is formed from its deep-rooted history. It becomes an identity, so the formation of a misogynistic culture in South Korea results from the linkage between history and the current social context. Therefore, this article attempts to answer the question of how does Korean history impact the misogynistic culture in contemporary South Korea?

There have been many studies on misogyny in South Korea in the last decade. These include studies by Kim (2017; 2018; 2021a; 2021b), Jeong and Lee (2018), Ashman et al (2020), Park and Kim (2021), Lee and Abidin (2021), and Youngmi (2021). The most recent works on misogyny in South Korea are studies by Chen (2023), Kwon (2023), and Fahy (2023). Undoubtedly, all these works provide us with an understanding of misogyny in the South Korean context. To better understand how and why the phenomenon of misogyny in South Korea, this article aims to contribute to this literature by uncovering the historical-religious background within Confucianism that influence misogyny in South Korea.

## **Discourse, Power-Knowledge and Sex**

Foucault's key term is 'discourse,' which refers to relationships between power and knowledge. Discourse is a collection of assertions with social power that significantly impact people's behaviour and thought processes (Mills 1997). As a result, any discourse must assume that language has shaped the subject's identity. Foucault maintains that the discursive structure determines what we consider significant, how we understand objects and events, and how we position them within a system of meaning (Mills 1997). Consequently, speech dictates how we see and respond to an object.

The connection between power and knowledge is intrinsically linked to the practice of discourse. Foucault argues that society's search for truth and meaning is a constant fight between competing discourses. Consequently, dominant discourse and peripheral discourse will always exist. Foucault centres his ideas around the processes by which one particular discourse controls what is understood and what is true. According to Foucault, power is a crucial aspect of understanding this. The Foucauldian worldview denies a singular conception of power. Instead of being oppressive, power is creative and ubiquitous. According to Foucault, power permeates all social relationships, generating various forms of behaviour but restricting them (Mills 1997). Additionally, according to Foucault (1980), power continuously influences knowledge while knowledge continuously generates power. Simply put, power influences knowledge, and knowledge sustains power.

This relationship between power and knowledge produces a dominant discourse that the public accepts as the truth. According to Foucault, the regime of truth is naturally what those in positions of power want. This notion is recognised as a statement with a power bias, yet it is regarded as the truth. A substantial amount of credibility supports every assertion. There is no 'true' interpretation of the ruler other than the truth. In acquiring this knowledge, the bearer of power attempts to exert control or dominance over other subjects. Foucault refers to this as subjection, which is the process of controlling the subject by making new knowledge.

Discourses about sex are powerful tools for social control and normalisation in the contemporary world, and sexuality serves as a vehicle for this discourse power (Phelan 1990: 245). Sex becomes the essence of society's existence; sex is reality. According to Foucault's thesis, sex is a product of the sexual apparatus. Contrary to popular belief, sex is not a pre-given datum that was just warped or characterised by the sexuality machinery; rather, it is a manufactured good, a signifier of a certain

arrangement of the body. This sexual machinery is the primary focus of what Foucault refers to as biopower, a collection of tools that allowed the management of bodies and the planned control of existence (Phelan 1990, 246). For effective management, the offender must be rendered helpful, obedient, and normal rather than eliminated. It necessitates that a population be passive but also productive and reproductive. These make sex the focal point of subject formation in both senses. Sex and cultural understanding of those foundations work together to shape society into men and women now. Just as every culture has its own language, each has its own set of scripts that members must adhere to while learning to perform the feminine, masculine, or both parts.

### **Misogyny**

In the 1970s, second-wave feminists used misogyny to refer to disrespectful behaviour towards women. Most people understood that overt acts of violence, such as sexual assault or homicide, were indicative of misogyny. At the same time, more subtle forms of sexism against women were indicative of a more pervasive cultural problem. Misogyny, however, became nearly synonymous with sexism during the so-called fourth wave of feminism that started in the early 21st century and may be used to reflect prejudices against women in addition to acts of violence or hate that specifically target women (Kendall 2022). As a result, sexism has developed many definitions with varying severity.

The feminist theory argues that sexism is a product of and a tool for maintaining rigid gender norms. In traditional patriarchal countries, women have been socialised to be homemakers and secretaries to serve their male counterparts. While most people would agree that women's rights made great strides in the 20th century, most women in the 2000s nevertheless faced criticism for assuming positions that threatened rather than bolstered the status quo (Kendall 2022). There was still a gender pay gap in the professional sports industry in the 2020s. Still, misogyny persisted in other spheres of society.

### **Misogynistic Culture in Korean History**

The establishment of Confucianism under the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) profoundly impacted Korean cultural norms about sexuality and gender interactions (Deuchler, 1992, 4). The three pillars of Confucianism are fidelity to the ministerial calling, loyalty to one's family, and chastity in the home (Deuchler 1992:257). A revolutionary philosophy, Confucianism

sought to improve society. It did more than spark a new kind of political discourse about men and society; it led to the implementation of a social development programme that restructured and modernised South Korean society. During the Joseon dynasty, Confucianism and a kinship system based on highly organised patrilineal lineage groups were South Korean society's driving forces and organising principles.

Chastity was regarded as the highest virtue for women in Confucian thought, along with fidelity to one's spouse and, by extension, one's family lineage. The emphasis on the monogamous nature of marriage eliminated the need for a second spouse. Widows of aristocratic (*yangban*) families who were too young to have children were forbidden to remarry for the remainder of their lives (Deuchler 1992: 259).

Although it might be claimed that physical and spiritual chastity are closely connected, the notion of chastity throughout this period refers primarily to virginity or the physical sense of chastity. One may argue that the latter inspires the former, but the latter's focus on physical chastity stands out more prominently. As a result, Confucian philosophy established positions for women that demanded certain conduct from them (Deuchler 1992: 280). Either the women who played these roles to perfection or the women who rebelled against these roles are the ones who will be remembered. Therefore, Confucianism rejects the idea of a woman as a subject. To maintain the Confucian hierarchy system between the sexes, it was necessary to suppress female sexuality and other forms of human desire.

During the Manchu Qing dynasty's invasion of the Joseon kingdom in Korea, a considerable number of Joseons were subjected to enslavement by the Qing army. Following the war, the Joseon populace relocated to their native land. The term '*Hwanyang-nyen*' is a pejorative expression that denotes women of immoral character who were subjected to enslavement by the Manchu in 1637 ("화양년," n.d.). Consequently, the term '*hwanyang-nyen*' acquired a derogatory connotation and continues to be employed as a gender-biased expression, owing to its association with the vilification of women who had returned from Manchuria on the grounds of their alleged sexual impurity.

The use of 'comfort women' was integral to Imperial Japan's war effort throughout the Second Sino-Japanese and Pacific Wars (Yoon 2015, 461). As Japan's aggressiveness grew, the supply of these women was inadequate to fulfil the military's growing needs, particularly after the China War. Stopping Japanese troops from committing sexual assaults on local Chinese women, particularly after the 'Nanjing Massacre' of 1937,

seems to have been the primary motive for the comfort women system (Yoon 2015: 462). Young Korean women, who were subjects of Japan's colonial rule at the time, were an appropriate replacement for local Chinese and Japanese women. After the Nanjing massacre, many Korean women were recruited into the comfort system to improve Japan's international standing. Sending colonial women from Korea ensured that regular Japanese women were safeguarded. Since Japanese women were expected to have children who would be brought up as loyal subjects of the emperor, the armed forces of Japan did not think Japanese women should be in that position (Tanaka 2018, 97).

The Joseon dynasty was in power in Korea at the time of Japan's colonisation, and it had formally accepted Confucianism as the driving theory of all elements of life. Based on seniority, class, and other factors, Confucianism taught people to respect the established order of things. Also, women were trained to submit to men, and chastity and virginity were seen as important virtues. There was no institution of licenced prostitution in Korea before the introduction of this by the Japanese colonial authority, which had been in use in Japan since the Edo period.

In 1990, comfort women first emerged as a political problem in South Korea. During Japanese colonial rule, comfort women were enslaved for sexual purposes. It took 40 years for the question of comfort women's presence during the war to be publicly debated. Many Japanese and South Koreans are embarrassed about the existence of comfort women. Thus, they have sought to hide this shameful chapter of their history (Sojeong 2017). Some individuals were hesitant to inform foreign society about the predicament of comfort women when Hak-Sun Kim, the first woman to speak out about it, held a news conference. They saw the loss of chastity by Korean women at the hands of Japanese men as a stain on the honour of their country, and they were shamed by their inability to protect their sisters, so they sought to suppress the comfort women (Sojeong 2017).

As South Korea started the 20th century, several women obtained advanced degrees, obtained employment, sported sophisticated hairstyles, and participated in unrestricted relationships. They were known as the 'new women' (Suh 2013). However, some considered these women unattractive because they violated customary patriarchal discipline. People believed that modern women had forsaken the 'Joseon-ness' and perfect femininity of South Korea and criticised them for being vanity-driven. Similar attitudes occurred regarding *yang-gongju*, or western princess, a prostituted woman who entertained U.S. military personnel between the 1950s and 1980s (Kunkel 1994). While South Korea took advantage of

them and called them patriotic for earning money from the United States, Korean males felt embarrassed for them because the loss of virginity undoubtedly renders a woman less appealing, forcing her to settle for a less desirable partner. For example, she might be forced to marry a widower with a child or a guy with a disability. Men in South Korea place a great emphasis on the chastity of women before marriage, since it is a part of the culture and historical tradition upon which their society is founded. Men dressed in current clothes hung around with Americans, and chewing gum was not seen negatively. The terms ‘new man’ or “*yang-wangja*” did not exist. So, women were seen as troublemakers who degraded South Korea’s values and dignity (Sojeong 2017).

### **The Impact of History on Misogynistic Culture in Contemporary South Korea**

The term “*kimchi-nyeo*” or “kimchi girl” marks the conclusion of this chain of descent (Ahn et al. 2016). It is slang for a young Korean girl who is vain, enamoured with high-end fashion accessories, and expects her partner to foot the bill for their dates and eventual wedding (Kim 2018). Even if there are indeed vain ladies who inspired this term, it has become a pejorative for some to apply to all Korean women. They believe that women from other countries are ethically superior to Korean women. Moreover, misogynists and sexists sometimes label Korean feminists as “*kimchi-nyeo*” (Kim 2018). As a result, the ‘Koreanness’ of Korean women is the foundation of Korean sexism. Misogynists believe that Korean women humiliate the nation, but Korean males are responsible for preserving the nation’s illustrious heritage. This perspective demonstrates that nationalism is the underlying ideology of South Korea’s misogyny.

Ilbe is an online forum with illogical attitudes regarding politics, women, and minority groups. Ilbe users argue that Korean ladies are *kimchi-nyeo* for various reasons. The first of these concerns is the military; male citizens of South Korea are obligated to serve in the armed forces. One reason misogynists in South Korea label women *kimchi-nyeo* is that they believe women are taking advantage of the nation’s security system (Ahn et al. 2016). They claim that women are not contributing to the cost of our national defence.

The second problem is romantic relationships and marriage; men often feel that Korean women do not contribute enough financially to relationships or marriages. Some Western female visitors on a TV programme on Korean culture caused controversy when they stated that



they did not understand why men in South Korea paid extra for dates and marriage (Kim 2018: 160). Some women may assume that men are better able to provide financially. It would be unfair to assume that all women share this viewpoint. It is important to remember that the patriarchal system has historically resulted in fewer opportunities for women to advance financially. Nevertheless, misogynists do not care about the facts and instead blame women.

Thirdly, misogynists look down on Korean women because they are not as attractive as Japanese women. As a form of hate speech, Ilbe users frequently compare and contrast the unique “*jongteuk*”, or racial traits, of Korean women with those of Japanese women to insist that Korean women are selfish and lack sense. This idealised wife figure, known as “*sushi-nyeo*” or sushi girl, is a popular target of this comparison. The ethnic slur *sushi-nyeo* is often used to refer to Japanese women, and it is not uncommon for them to be referenced in talks about the perfect husband (Kim 2018:159).

Gender discourse makes it harder to establish gender equality in South Korea. Confucianism, which includes moral standards and laws governing the physical and spiritual realms of life, has historically had a significant influence on Korean culture. The tenets of Confucianism have affected the behaviour of Koreans, making it a culture with strong roots in modern South Korea. The social significance of its presence in South Korea contributes to the social construction of misogynistic culture through perceptions and responses to interpreting Confucianism’s principles and norms. Foucault considers power to be the most important factor in the production of discourse. Confucianism is a kind of knowledge that came from the governing party, notably in China in the past; it later became an ideology due to the king’s use of power to propagate Confucianism in South Korea. This discourse on knowledge and authority has brought truth to Korean culture since Confucian philosophy is essentially the king’s will. Foucault believes that, with the establishment of the regime of truth, a person would be deemed virtuous if he complied with the established norms.

The Confucian philosophy is the product of the virtuous dictatorship in South Korea and the society’s practice of Confucian principles and standards. In Korean culture, the Confucian principle of chastity, particularly for women, has become a prejudiced reality. The perception of women’s virginity is crucial to men. In Korean history, women have been victims of wartime and imperial crimes. Women who were seized, enslaved, and raped by colonialists were thought to have tainted Confucian ideals and standards because they had betrayed their husbands or lost their virginity,

rendering them unclean. In the Confucian rule of virtue, female impurity was seen as improper and disgraceful. Based on Confucian philosophy, the inferior status of women in Korean history justifies misogynistic conduct in Korean society, particularly among males. Men believe that women have broken Confucian doctrine in the past by losing their virginity at the hands of other males (non-Korean men), leading them to believe that it is true that women are nation-destroying. This is evident from the reasoning men use to evaluate Korean women nowadays.

The majority of society still places a high value on female chastity, particularly among the elderly. Whenever a woman loses her virginity, it is usually because of something she did, yet she still blames herself and gives up the life expected of a normal female. Even suicide is a possibility. A woman who was immediately accosted by her rapist while travelling on a highway perished tragically while attempting to flee the situation by swimming in a nearby river. As a result, a man may utilise the chastity idea to own a woman he wants by raping her so she cannot marry anyone else except him (Shim 2001:137). In contrast, men's chastity has hardly ever become a problem. Because of the double standard of sexuality in Korean society, men who flirt and engage in adultery are admirable rather than repulsive.

## **Conclusion**

South Korea is renowned for K-Pop and K-Drama, and its musicians and performers adhere to certain aesthetic standards. The international community increasingly favours K-Drama because the lovely romance genre is the most popular. However, due to South Korea's high degree of sexist conduct and low level of female empowerment, the portrayal of males as loving and compassionate in dramas is regrettably not representative of the actual world. The culture of sexist conduct in South Korea is rooted in Confucian philosophy.

The dialogue between power and knowledge in South Korean society has influenced the regime of truth. This discourse emerged since power spawned knowledge, and knowledge will continue to sustain power. The King of Joseon exercised a great deal of influence on the development of Confucianism among the populace. This ideology formed the foundation of the values and standards of society as it evolved into a regime of righteousness. Confucian philosophy has an impact on contemporary Korean society's views on the double standard of sexuality and a woman's virginity, turning it into a skewed social justification.

The long history of conflict and colonialism in Korea has resulted in many victims, particularly women who were enslaved and exploited as comfort women by colonialists. According to legend, the disappearance of a chaste Korean woman's spouse tainted Confucian ideology, leading to the rejection and shunning of these women by their families and by themselves because they resisted the distorted reality of Confucian philosophy. Consequently, Korean males see women as a ruin to the nation in modern times due to the historical narrative based on the philosophy of Confucianism. In particular, men in Korea find justification for their sexist actions in online forums. The evolution of sexist conduct is inseparable from how history constructs a perception of racism. Due to their pervasive social understanding, Korean women do not have a strong enough position to combat this reality. Therefore, sexist conduct is the greatest obstacle for feminists in advancing gender equality in South Korea, since the historical creation of power and knowledge discourses has influenced how women should be positioned and behave.

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