

Gendered Nationalism: Western Imperialism, Women's Status, and the Politics of Reform in East Asia

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Introduction

Women's status in late 19th-century East Asia is best understood within the broader context of Western imperialism and the civilizational discourse it provoked. China's defeat in the First Opium War against Britain shattered its longstanding claim to regional hegemony. This shift was formalized by the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, the first in a series of unequal treaties imposed by Western powers. These treaties redrew the geopolitical landscape of the late 19th century and reinforced the West's growing assertions of moral and civilizational superiority. China's decline created a power vacuum exploited by imperial powers, who viewed the weakening Qing dynasty as an opportunity to expand Western dominance across Asia. Observing China's political and economic collapse in the face of Western aggression, the newly centralized Meiji government in Japan

adopted a "catch-up" mentality. Determined to repeal its own unequal treaties, Japan pursued rapid Westernization to strengthen the nation. Japan's strategic embrace of Western modernity stood in contrast to China's fragmented resistance, and ultimately helped root the concept of reform in imperialist logic. By the late 19th century, as Meiji Japan's regional influence rose and Qing China's declined, Korea became both a site of colonial rivalries—first between Japan and China, then between Japan and Russia—and a victim of unequal treaties modeled on those previously imposed on China and Japan.

The imperialist encounter catalyzed both external transformations in political power structures and internal reflections on gender, tradition, and national identity. Within this context, women's status became a focal point of Western claims about the "backwardness" and incivility of East Asian societies.¹ This

¹ Hyaeweol Choi, "Gender Equality, a New Moral Order" in *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*:

New Women, Old Ways (University of California Press, 2009), pg. 22.

paper argues that the power imbalance created by Western imperialism triggered a fundamental epistemological shift in East Asia—one that brought the question of women's status to the forefront of reformist and civilizational discourses in China, Japan, and Korea.

China

In late 19th-century China, women's status became a terrain on which national survival and modern identity were contested. The Qing Dynasty's defeats in the Opium Wars—symbolizing national humiliation and the erosion of China's regional influence—disrupted the existing balance of power in Asia and catalyzed a shift in Chinese tradition. By 1865, less than a decade after the Second Opium War, Western narratives were circulating images of “Chinese vice”—including opium smoking, footbinding, and public execution—presented as timeless “Chinese customs.”² These portrayals reinforced the perception of Chinese culture as “barbaric,” and footbinding in particular emerged as a source of shame for Chinese reformers due to its simultaneously provocative and humiliating visual

associations³. This discursive framing positioned Chinese women's suffering as emblematic of a wider cultural decay. Reformers adopted the Western language of theatricality as a means of mobilizing popular opinion and emphasizing the urgency of reform, using the anti-footbinding movement as a platform to do so. The long-standing Confucian association of visibility with women meant that a woman's appearance, traditionally confined to the inner quarters, was understood as a reflection of her inner virtue; how she was seen determined how she was judged⁴. A woman's appearance acted as a presentation of her inner virtue, and how she was perceived was deterministic of her character. Footbinding, as part of the gendered spatial segregation articulated by Neoconfucian scholars like Zhu Xi, remained largely removed from the public sphere until “the unseen and the indecent became an everyday sight.”⁵ In this new context, “the female body was turned inside out” by anti-footbinding discourse, just as Chinese epistemological traditions were disrupted by the West's “offshore vantage point” and the imperial power imbalance that legitimized it⁶.

² Dorothy Ko, “The Body Inside Out” in *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*, University of California Press, 2005, 41.

³ Ko, “The Body Inside Out,” 42.

⁴ Ko, “The Body Inside Out,” 41.

⁵ Ko, “The Body Inside Out,” 42.

⁶ Ko, “The Body Inside Out,” 42.

Where Western aggression had catalyzed a shift in the epistemology of Chinese tradition, the period following the collapse of the Qing Dynasty cemented this transformation through debates over women's status. By the late 19th century, the Qing's declining authority and the exposure of perceived cultural "vices" contributed to a deteriorating national self-image. In the aftermath of the 1911 Revolution, the sharp contrast between an advancing, Westernized imperial Japan and a collapsing, traditional imperial China underscored the urgency of reform. The intensification of anti-footbinding campaigns emerged as a reactive effort to address this crisis of modernity.

After the 1911 Revolution, warlord Yan Xishan rose to power—not as a unifying national leader, but as a dominant regional authority—maintaining control of Shanxi province until the Communist victory in 1949. Between 1917 and 1922, Yan's anti-footbinding campaigns "changed the nature of the anti-footbinding movement from voluntary social action to state mandate and surveillance," as he leveraged the machinery of the state to redefine Chinese morality. This was accomplished through a reconstitution of

female virtue, shifting it from a private moral code to a public expression of national discipline and modernity⁷.

With Yan Xishan's state-sanctioned campaigns and Sun Yat-sen's republican government's "1912 proclamation to ban foot-binding," women's status became a vehicle for moral rejuvenation rather than a site for its transmission⁸. By the late 19th century, women's status had become inextricably tied to the "spectacle of female suffering"—a narrative steeped in visibility and leveraged to legitimize Western imperialism under the guise of moral responsibility⁹. The epistemological shift in Chinese tradition had positioned women's status at the center of broader debates on Chinese modernity, in which the Western civilizing mission was seen as both a challenge and a framework for reconstructing China's power and moral character. Efforts to abolish practices such as footbinding became a means for Chinese reformers to engage with Western critiques while asserting China's capacity to define its own path to modernity.

In this context, the writings of Qiu Jin—a feminist revolutionary executed after a failed uprising against the Qing Dynasty in 1907—

⁷ Ko, "The Body Inside Out," 50.

⁸ Ko, "The Body Inside Out," 50.

⁹ Ko, "The Body Inside Out," 68.

demonstrate the recasting of women's status as a symbol of national decline and national potential. Qiu lamented and condemned the suffering of Chinese women in her poems, writing in 1904, "Cut off from my family I leave my native land. / Unbinding my feet I clean out a thousand years of poison."¹⁰ Here, the unbinding of her feet becomes a metonym for the unbinding of national identity from its antiquated traditions. This reflects how the centralization of women's status to the civilizational discourse in China necessitated the entanglement of nationalist and feminist aims. That same year, she published an essay entitled "A Respectful Proclamation to China's 200 Million Women Comrades," where she wrote, "All of you are aware that we are about to lose our country. Men can barely protect themselves. How can we rely on them? We must revitalize ourselves [...] Everybody! Please keep my hopes alive!"¹¹ Qiu's essay appeals to nationalist and feminist sentiments through the shared fate of a nation in decline, as she constructs female agency as a necessary precondition for China's project of modernization. Qiu Jin's writings—in addition to those of other nationalists and feminists—functioned as both an internal call

for liberation and an external assertion of China's capacity to modernize on its own terms. Thus, in China, the crisis of civilizational decline became a necessarily gendered problem, with women's status acting as both a symptom and a solution to the issue.

Japan

Japan's encounter with Western imperialism and its subsequent modernization efforts placed women's status at the heart of its national identity project. By the beginning of World War I, Japan stood as Asia's only sovereign, imperial power—a position strategically constructed through decades of socio-political and economic reform and efforts to rapidly industrialize and militarize the nation. However, the idea that imperial Japan had circumvented the unequal treaties that afflicted the rest of Asia is a historical myth inaugurated by the West's imagining of Commodore Perry's arrival and sustained by Western historical recollections of early relations between Japan and the West. The 1854 Kanagawa Treaty included a unilateral most-favored-nation (MFN) clause that was "unilateral in operation, unlimited in scope and unconditional in operation,"

¹⁰ Franceschini, Ivan, and Nicholas Loubere. "Made in China Journal: Volume 4, Issue 1, 2019." *Made in China Journal* 4, no. 1.

¹¹ Atwill, David, and Yurong Atwill. *Sources in Chinese history: diverse perspectives from 1644 to the present*. Routledge, 2021, pg. 128.

essentially granting the United States and its citizens advantages and privileges that were not reciprocated¹². The 1858 Harris Treaty aggravated the unequal conditions granted by previous treaties, as it included the opening of five more trading ports, the granting of extraterritorial rights to Westerners, another unilateral MFN clause, and a lack of Japanese tariff autonomy.¹³

The unequal treaties imposed on Japan triggered widespread inflation and deepened peasant impoverishment during the Tokugawa period, undermining the legitimacy of the shogunate and eroding its base of support. This upheaval ultimately culminated in the 1868 Meiji Restoration. Under this new governance, Japan made repeated attempts to revisit the treaties, but the West's refusal to do so cultivated "a sense of arrogance among foreigners and a sense of grievance among Japanese" that remained until the Anglo-Japanese Commercial Treaty of 1911 restored Japan's economy autonomy.¹⁴ Heeding China's resistance to Western civilization and subsequent deterioration as a regional power as a warning, a newly centralized imperial

Japan understood that Westernization was an unavoidable prerequisite to holding power within the newly globalized system of imperialism.

The Meiji government quickly pursued modernization through a Western lens, initiating rapid industrialization, expanding infrastructure, dispatching the Iwakura Mission (1871–1873), and establishing a national military in 1873. These reforms, though extensive, were tainted by the continued Western perception of Japan's "backwardness" because of the low status of Japanese women, which had been "generally neglected by the whole of society."¹⁵ In the late 19th century, the issue of women's status therefore became central to reform discourse in Japan, as the shifting balance of power in East Asia provided an opportunity for the advancement of Japanese power on the basis of its alignment with Western notions of morality. Amid China's decline and the West's expansion, imperial Japan's advancement was strategically framed as a regional particularity predicated on the elevation of women's status and the intellectual and moral abasement of

¹² Atsumi, Toshihiro, and Daniel M. Bernhofen. *The effects of the unequal treaties on normative, economic and institutional changes in 19th century Japan*. na, 2011, pg. 5.

¹³ Atsumi and Bernhofen, "The Effects of Unequal Treaties," 6.

¹⁴ Atsumi and Bernhofen, "The Effects of Unequal Treaties," 123.

¹⁵ Fukuzawa, Yukichi. *Fukuzawa Yukichi On Japanese Women: Selected Works*. University of Tokyo Press, 1988, pg. 6.

neighboring powers in East Asia. In other words, Japan constructed an image of its own morality and uniqueness by casting its neighbors as intellectually and morally inept. This narrative relied heavily upon the state of women's status. Japanese intellectuals like Nakamura Masanao advocated women's education on the basis of their role as the moral foundation of the home, whereas intellectuals like Fukuzawa Yukichi advocated "equality between the sexes"¹⁶ as a means for "the improvement of the Japanese race."¹⁷

In both cases, the issue of women's status became a platform for imperial Japan to project an image of enlightenment and civilization_ the government's focus became expanding access to education for women. Initially, Japan established "Gakusei," or the Education System Order, which made primary education compulsory for both boys and girls in 1872. As women's status became increasingly constitutive to Japan's reform discourse at the turn of the century, the imperial state became increasingly incentivized to support the elevation of women's status through education. In 1899, the Girls' High School Law made it mandatory

to have at least one girls' high school per prefecture, but it was through private sector institutions—for example, Tsuda Umeko's Women's English College in 1900, and Naruse Jinzō's Japan Women's University in 1901 — those Japanese reformers realized their aim of "educating women to be good wives and wise mothers."¹⁸ Though the schools emphasized domestic virtues, they offered women unprecedented access to subjects like language and philosophy that had been previously restricted for the vast majority of Japanese women.

Most of the discourse surrounding women's status in Japan was embedded within the broader reformist project of building a modern state shaped by both Western thought and Japanese nationalism. In this context, the substance of reforms related to women's status held significant weight. As a result, Japan could set itself apart from China and Korea, whose dominating moral framework of Confucianism was, by comparison, "nothing but a philosophy to oppress the mind and, in the process, destroy the physical body."¹⁹ Imperial Japan's engagement with gender reform was

¹⁶ Fukuzawa, "On Japanese Women," 35.

¹⁷ Fukuzawa, "On Japanese Women," 36.

¹⁸ Harrington, Ann M. "Women and Higher Education in the Japanese Empire (1895—1945)." *Journal of Asian History* 21, no. 2 (1987): 169-186, pgs. 174-176.

¹⁹ Fukuzawa, "On Japanese Women," 7.

therefore less about transforming women's lived realities and more about performing Western modernity and civility on the global stage. The writings of Japanese intellectuals like Fukuzawa Yukichi, along with the imperial government's educational reforms, exemplify how women's status was employed as a tool to legitimize Japan's moral ascendancy over the rest of East Asia and to assert its position as a regional hegemon.

Korea

In Korea, late 19th century discourse on women's status emerged within a contested moral landscape shaped by colonial pressures, missionary influence, and internal ambitions for reform. As Western civilization encroached on East Asia, Korean intellectuals began to embrace the notion that gender relations were indicative of a nation's degree of civilization. At the same time, the contrast between Japan's successful modernization and China's disastrous resistance prompted a critical reassessment of Korea's own civilizational status and, subsequently, the status of Korean women. This was exemplified in the Kanhwa Treaty of 1876, which served as Korea's first unequal treaty and granted imperial Japan the extraterritorial rights

otherwise held exclusively by Western imperial powers. This, combined with over three decades of the Qing Dynasty's continued decline, led Korean intellectuals to believe that "the degraded lives of Korean women" were a product of Confucian ethics that "simply proved Korea's backwardness." This perspective was reinforced by American missionaries, who framed the "improved status of women in the West" as "one of the manifestations of Christian civilization's superiority," therefore positioning Christian morality as the core of true civilization.²⁰ The discourse on women's status was invariably shaped by a gender ideology that both "subordinated and essentialized [the] role of women" —an ideology that was thought to be rooted in the "hierarchical differentiation of gender roles" in Confucianism.²¹

This hierarchical relationship became a point of contention provoked by American missionaries and advanced by Korean intellectuals, whose dual challenges to Confucian gender ideology were predicated on "the new moral principle of gender equality as a sign of civilization and modernity."²² The missionary association of Confucian ethics with a lack of civilization stemmed from an

²⁰ Choi, "Gender Equality," 21 & 23.

²¹ Choi, "Gender Equality," 41.

²² Choi, "Gender Equality," 44.

undisputed assumption of Western superiority—an assumption repudiated by Korean intellectuals. These intellectuals were “situated in the contact zone between the Confucian-ruled late Chosŏn Dynasty and the challenging new forces of Japan and the West” and therefore sought to reformulate rather than abandon Confucian moral principles using “Western political and sociocultural ideals and practices.”²³ As Korean sovereignty became increasingly threatened by Japanese and Western imperialism, Korean intellectuals hoping to preserve Korean independence through nationalist reforms turned to women’s status through education in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.²⁴ Women’s education had already been established as “a harbinger of modernity for its liberation of women from the inner quarters, its challenge to the traditional patriarchal system, and its embrace of gender equality” and therefore satisfied the partial rejection of Confucianism and partial acceptance of Western thought.²⁵

Newspapers led the discourse on civilization and enlightenment in Korea—Tongnip sinmun (Independence news),

Hwang Sŏng sinmun (Capital gazette), and Cheguk sinmun (Empire news) were among the more popular papers.²⁶ In 1896, a column in Tongnip sinmun entitled “Aeho a nyo ron!” (“Alas, our women!”) contrasted the free and educated Western woman with “the poor Korean woman,” who was described “as a prisoner, confined in jail without the right of freedom—nothing but a blind, uneducable fool.”²⁷ In 1902, a column of Cheguk sinmun entitled “Namnyô ui punbyol” (“The distinction between man and woman”) wrote of the “superiority of the Western woman,” providing detailed examples of their “complete freedom and rights in morality [and] learning.”²⁸ These newspaper commentaries reveal the articulation of internal critiques of gender inequality in the language of Western civility. Arguments like these exemplified the nationalistic anxiety about Korea’s civilizational status by reimagining women’s education as a civic necessity. In co-opting and internalizing the rhetoric of Western superiority, Korean intellectuals made the elevation of women’s status, especially through education, a requisite for national salvation. Educational reforms in particular

²³ Choi, “Gender Equality,” 31.

²⁴ Leighanne, Y. U. H. “Korean Female Education, Social Status, and Early Transitions, 1898 to 1910.” *Korea Journal* 61, no. 4 (2021): 271-305, pg. 293.

²⁵ Leighanne, “Korean Female Education,” 273.

²⁶ Suh, Jiyoung. “The ‘New Woman’ and the Topography of Modernity in Colonial Korea.” *Korean Studies* (2013): 11-43, pg. 14.

²⁷ Suh, “The ‘New Woman,’” 15.

²⁸ Suh, “The ‘New Woman,’” 15.

became the terrain upon which national identity and moral legitimacy were debated; gender thus became a vehicle for negotiating Korea's place in an emerging world order dictated by Western imperial logics.

Conclusion

Across late 19th- and early 20th-century East Asia, Western imperialism catalyzed a civilizational discourse in which women's status became a key metric of modernity—and, by extension, morality. Within the shared context of Western aggression, the collapse of Qing China, the rise of imperial Japan, and the decline of Korea's Chosŏn Dynasty, women's status emerged as both a marker of civility and a site of epistemological transformation. In China, this was exemplified by anti-footbinding campaigns, which “either infantilized or humiliated [women] by exposing their bodies to ridicule or inspection

in public”—mirroring the way the West had similarly humiliated China by subjecting its cultural practices to external scrutiny and derision.²⁹ Concurrently, Japan's Meiji government leveraged the urgency of modernization to elevate women's status in ways that showcased alignment with Western civilizational ideals and bolstered Japan's international legitimacy. Korea experienced a dual challenge: navigating imperial rivalries and integrating the influence of American missionaries, both of which contributed to the reframing of gender discourse through Confucian and Western lenses. Across the region, reformers seized upon women's status as a site of intervention to redefine national identity—ultimately resisting, yet also reproducing, the imperial logic that had first called their civilizational standing into question.

²⁹ Suh, “The ‘New Woman,’” 15.

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