as wasteful and vainglorious. She argues that the stereotype is based on only a few examples but has been used as a tool for critiquing all New Women.

Yi Kwangsu’s “Ten Commandments for New Woman” (Source 15) and the rebuttal by Ko Yong-su (Source 16) demonstrate the tensions and conflicts between conservative ideals for women advocated by male intellectuals and new, liberal ideals cherished by New Women.

Chu Yosöp’s “objective” characterization of the New Woman and the Old Woman, using the level of Western-style education as a criterion, is quite telling in the sense that he ultimately advocates that, “the fundamental desire or wish of any woman should be to become a wise mother and good wife,” reaffirming and reconstituting the traditional notion of “womanly virtue” (pudõk) with modern sensibilities that include a woman’s right to choose her own spouse and to create a “sweet home” (Source 17). The discourse on “wise mother and good wife” became an integral part of the discourse on New Womanhood in the 1920s and 1930s. Not only male intellectuals but also New Women themselves participated in elaborating the modern gender ideology of “wise mother and good wife.”

7 Na Hyesŏk: The ideal woman

[“Isang chŏk puin,” Hakchigwang 3 (December 1914): 13–14]

What does “ideal” mean? The popular concept of “ideal” is a notion born out of desire. It may be thought of as an “emotional” ideal. In what follows, I will focus on what I call an “intellectual/spiritual” ideal.

So, who could be considered an ideal woman? I do not think an ideal woman has existed, either in the past or the present. It may be because I have not studied the characteristics of women thoroughly enough, but I think it is probably because my ideal of womanhood has an exceptionally high standard. There are any number of female models in various fields. Examples include Katuyusa, the female protagonist in Tolstoy’s novel Resurrection, whose ideal was transformation; Magda, the central character in Hermann Sudermann’s novel Heinat, whose ideal was self-interest; Nora, the protagonist in Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, whose ideal was true love; Mrs. Stowe, the author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, whose ideal was religious egalitarianism; Hiratsuka Raichô, whose ideal was intellectual genius; and Yosano Akiko, whose ideal was a happy family. I do not necessarily admire all of the ideals pursued by these women, but for now, their goals are as close to the ultimate ideal as we can get. Thus I pay homage to them.

Why, you may ask. Most people allow themselves to be governed by destiny. They are afraid to cultivate themselves, fearing any change. They are weak-minded, without any notion of an ideal in their minds, preferring to stay in their static lives of ease and comfort. However, we need to acquire all the strengths we can muster and elevate our consciousness daily. By doing so, we can progress toward the best ideal. We cannot say that a woman has achieved an ideal if she is a moral woman by virtue of habit alone, or by merely fulfilling her secular duties. I believe that she has to go one step further and prepare herself to fulfill future ideals. I also believe that it is not wise to only pursue the customary ideal of “good wife, wise mother” (yangch’ô hyŏnmo). It seems that that ideal is one of the favorite marketing strategies used by teachers. The man is both husband and father; but I have never heard of any curriculum that emphasizes “good husband, wise father” (yanghu hyŏnbu). It is only women whose conduct as good spouse and wise parent is reinforced through our education, making women into mere appendages of men. Such an education does not develop the mind. Also, the idea of a warm and compliant womanhood, a necessary point of propaganda to turn women into slaves, cannot be an ideal for women.

Until now, women have been raised in the ideology that instructs them to devote themselves entirely to the welfare of men. They are so accustomed to the domestic arena that they cannot tell right from wrong in matters that are outside of the private domain. Given this, how can a woman evolve into an ideal woman? Of course, she needs knowledge, skills, and artistic talent. She should be prepared to judge right from wrong in any matter, based on her common sense. She should be self-aware, with the desire to discover her unique abilities in realizing certain goals in life. She must understand contemporary thought, knowledge, and sensibility. Only then can she become a pioneer, equipped with all the power and qualifications that she needs in order to be an enlightened, ideal woman.

Therefore, we contemporaries must expand our knowledge and fulfill our duty by taking full responsibility for our actions. When we confront difficulties, we should think about them carefully and take them as opportunities to learn. As we cultivate our consciences, we get closer to the ideal. By doing so, we won’t be wasting our time, and, even if our lives end tomorrow, we can say that we lived an ideal life until the very end.

With the burning desire I have at this moment, I intend to devote myself to art. The path to the ideal is currently invisible. I cannot even see its outlines. But through the countless trials that are ahead of me, I will find my way to the path.

(Written on November 5, 1914)

8 Inaugural editorial from Sin yoja²

[“Ch’angsansa,” Sin yoja 1 (1920): 2–3]

Reform (hælgi)! This is the outcry of humankind after painfully grieving over the terrifying gunshots of the past five years [referring to World War I]. Liberation (hæbang)! This is the call of women who have been confined to the deep, dark, inner chambers for thousands of years. Excessively greedy ambition and egotism caused the war, breaking the peace of springtime and bringing mountains of death and oceans of blood. This war opposed the will
of heaven and the correct path of humankind. Similarly, it is an affront to humanity to treat women as slaves, locking them up in the inner quarters because they are presumed to be weak. If this practice is clearly in opposition to the way of humanity, how much longer can it survive? How much longer can it hold its power and influence? That era has come to an end. It is time to rectify the wrongdoings of the past. The cannon smoke of the prolonged war is lifting, and a bright day will break on earth. The auspicious light of peace has shone through, and a new stage is set, filled with hope.

Reform! Reform! This call for reform is echoed high and loud from every corner of the world. Truly the time has come for change. Ah, the new era has arrived. Time has come to break away from old things and bring in new things. The time has come to throw off the wrong-headed, evil practices of the past. The time has come to reform all things.

It is not a matter of selecting this or that for reform. We must thoroughly reform our entire society. In order to reform society, we must first reform the family, society’s most basic and fundamental unit. In order to reform the family, we have to liberate women, who are the masters (chun) of the house. And we must first liberate women if we are to catch up with the rest of the world, be competitive, lead lives that can be respected by other states, and transform our entire social structure. We are not interested in seeking an acknowledgment through empty slogans such as “equality” (tongdang) or “respect for women” (yǒjon). We publish our magazine, Sin yöja, with the sole purpose of working in society, gaining emancipation, and finding ways in which we can help build a social order that is the envy of the world.

9 Kim Wŏnju: The self-awakening of women

[“Yoja ui chagak,” Sin yöja 3 (1920): 1–3]

Typically, the concept of “human being” encompasses both man and woman, and human society comes from the union of man and woman. This is obvious from the fact that each gender makes up one half of human society, and there are no distinct words that suggest man is human and woman is not human. We do have terms such as “man” (namja) and “woman” (yǒja), which make a distinction based on biology; however, both terms entail humanness. It is readily understandable that, if either man or woman were not here, human society could not exist. This was an unalterable natural law in the past, and it remains so now. Yet, men have ignored this constant truth and treated women as if they were slaves. The unfortunate result has been that women have lost their rights as human beings. It has become a woman’s second nature to think of herself as incapable and weak, so that she yields all of her rights to man and endures the unspeakable brutality of oppression.

Debates on morality and the law have been based solely on men’s views, completely excluding the perspective of that half of human society comprised of women. Only men have been entitled to education, which has been completely denied to women. All of these social practices are certainly counter to the inclusiveness of humanity. With all things related to human society, both men and women should be included. That is to say, we must think of woman’s interests and concerns simultaneously with those of man. When I say this, some may argue that men and women each have their own work to do, and their lives are destined for different domains; men and women are “distinct” (pyŏl) according to the law of nature, and therefore it is impossible for them to go beyond their designated domain. I would argue that, even if woman is inherently and naturally inferior to man, she is still human. Even if woman’s morality is not exactly the same as that of man, even if there is a difference in the degree of morality, one must still acknowledge that they share humanness. In principle, woman’s life should be equal to man’s life, and the goal of woman’s life should be equal to that of man. It is my view that there should be only one morality for humankind. There should not be two moralities applied differently to man and woman, and it should not be assumed that woman is inferior to man.

Think about it. There are 20 million people in Korea. Only half of the population is working—the men. The other half serves at the beck and call of men, like slaves. How terrible are the conditions Korean women live in! The boundary between the worlds of men and women has been created by men. Men have appropriated women’s rights. Women have been oppressed by men, have not experienced the pleasures of society, and have spent their entire lives in anguish and sorrow. How miserable they are! However, a more important reason for the condition of women is their own failure to take responsibility [for self-determination], as well as a lack of education and occupation. To rescue these miserable women in contemporary Korea, education should be offered to women, so that they can break the habit of laziness, prepare themselves for the strenuous efforts of life, engage in an occupation, wear themselves from dependence on others to adopt a spirit of autonomy and self-reliance, and awaken to their own responsibilities.

I think that our Korean society is undergoing a transition. Our civilization lost its old ideals but failed to replace them with a new set of ideals, and now there is chaos. We women are in the middle of this chaos. Should we subject ourselves ignorantly to the tricks of destiny? No, that would lead to self-destruction. If we are not fully awake at this time, the future of women in society will be annihilated forever. The key [to our survival] is to be mindful and pave our own way by equipping ourselves with education, work, and responsibility. We do not have to focus on our past. From now on, we must take off the yoke men have placed on us and be prepared to play a role as human beings in the truest sense.

We are [rightful] members of human society and the family. If any one of us does not achieve self-awakening, it is as if human society is losing one of its own, and the family is losing a sound contributor. If that is the case, how can it be said that the impact any one of us makes on the society or the family is negligible? Our relationship to the Korean nation is significant. Therefore,
women’s self-awakening is important to enhance women’s rights but also to reform Korean culture.

10 Kim Hwallan: Urging men to critically reflect on themselves

[“Namsōng ìi pansŏng âl ch’ok ham,” Sin yŏja 4 (June 1920): 38–40]

I think that some male readers will dismiss an essay in a magazine called “New Woman” (Sin yŏja) as impudent, thinking a title such as “Urging women to critically reflect on themselves” is perfectly valid, but “Urging men to critically reflect on themselves” is not. However, women have the right to criticize men’s wrongdoings and urge them to reflect on their behaviors. There is sincere appreciation for the efforts gentlemen make to scrutinize, criticize, and alert us to problems in the women’s world. We hope they will continue to enlighten us. But I suspect that men are too busy critiquing women to remember to reflect on themselves. Here, despite my shortcomings as a writer, I am going to discuss several issues that I wish our male readers would consider.

First, men are confident in the proposition that they are superior to women; therefore, they feel entitled to lay claim to the most powerful and important positions in everything. I hope that men reflect on this issue and ponder whether their sense of entitlement isn’t just a form of self-deceit. Regardless of gender, those who are proud of themselves and only find shortcomings in others, reveling in their own superiority, are destined to become self-defeaters because they gradually lose awareness of themselves.

Second, men should try to improve their own shortcomings before they find fault with women for their limitations. Given some notorious examples we have seen, no one can deny that there are some women who indulge in luxury and vanity. However, we educated women do not apply oil to our hair or wear cosmetics. We wear our simple and plain, coarse cotton clothes during the winter and hemp clothes during the summer. But, when we try sincerely to engage and find a way to contribute to social reform, don’t you lash out with all kinds of malicious remarks, saying we are impudent, contemptuous, and full of vanity? So, let me ask: what have men done for our society? Why is it that the majority of men selfishly waste time, entertaining themselves with their drinking and their sexual exploits day and night? I have to wonder how much wealth and knowledge men actually possess, when all I see is their arrogant self-indulgence: wearing suits that cost hundreds of won, shiny dress shoes, gold-rimmed eyeglasses and high-collared shirts, with silly accessories such as glittering gold teeth and walking sticks, just so they can cheerfully strut around in public. No one could ever suggest that this is a frugal lifestyle that is good for society. I can say that more than half of the so-called educated class of men leads such a lifestyle. But what I am really curious about is why these men, who consider themselves especially open-minded and generous, could be so biased. How could they accuse women of being self-indulgent while they engage in exactly the same behavior they criticize? Furthermore, in their irrational criticism and spiteful contempt, how can they generalize the ill-advised behavior of just a few women as something every woman does, and argue against education for women by claiming that women are not prepared for learning?

Third, men should think about their own character and qualifications before they set out to find the ideal wife and dream about raising a happy family. I often encounter men who lack considerable education or knowledge, and yet they deplore women who lack education and knowledge. We know that, once married, the husband is usually responsible for household finances and the children’s education. However, it is quite ridiculous to see many men, who are utterly incapable of handling money and have not inherited wealth from their parents—in other words, men who cannot support a family—wish for a wife equipped with good character and knowledge. I also hear that, while men freely frequent brothels, they want wives who are pure and chaste. How shameless! There are hundreds of thousands of men who, though they appear to be perfectly dignified, courteous, and thoughtful, will steal a secret glimpse at pretty young students passing by, then clear their throats and pretend otherwise. Among those who pretend to be devoted Christians, when they go to church clutching their Bibles and hymn books, listening piously, you sometimes see some of them surreptitiously glance down the aisle, examining the women. I do not think these men have true faith. Though they are totally lost, lacking purpose or ideas, without aim or direction, like a ship tossed by waves during a storm at sea, they laugh at women for their lack of will and weak minds. How ironic!

Fourth, I want to urge men who are unhappy in their marriages to reflect on themselves. They have gotten a taste of new civilization and new trends, and so others call them “new men” (sin ch’ôngyŏn). I understand that they might feel dissatisfied and frustrated with their wives, whose only purpose seems to be giving birth to children and sitting in the corner of the room sewing. They feel that their wives don’t understand anything about their activities or experience. They feel unconnected to their wives, and as a consequence these men react with resentment toward their parents, anger toward society, and pessimism toward the world. In the end, they turn away from loyalty and ignore morality to search for a woman, a so-called “ideal lover,” who will understand them and create a new family for them. I may be able to recognize the source of the feelings that explain their behavior, but I want to offer this advice: instead of doing harm to others and creating tragedy in the family and disorder in society, why don’t you expand the perspectives of your wife by trying to liberate her from ignorance and letting her experience life? No one is born with knowledge, and so, when she takes a break from household work, instill new knowledge in her. Do it with love and caring and enthusiasm. You can plant within her learning that will awaken her spirit, and in turn you will be
They argue that, “the morality of young women in our society is not a serious problem.” In the case of Cho, he attributes any such problem, not to female students, but to reckless male students, and he suggests that readers take a critical look at the integrity of young men who are involved in scandalous incidents.

18 Kim Wônju: The necessity of women’s education

[“Yôja kyoyûk âi p’ryô,” Tonga ilbo April 6, 1920]

Now everyone in Korea is ready to advocate education for women. Therefore, this issue may sound extremely mundane and commonsensical. Some may even ridicule me as being backward for even raising the issue now. However, while many in the vanguard passionately proclaim the necessity of women’s education, there are people who oppose education for women or cannot even imagine its purpose. Or some people acknowledge the urgency of the issue, but for some unknown reason they fail to act in the interest of women’s education.

Today the hope for peace shines in many countries of the world. These countries are wealthy and civilized. Their societies are enlightened and open to change. Their families are free and peaceful. Why on earth is it only our country, our society, and our families that continue to live in a condition of ignorance, weakness, debilitation, constraint, desolation, and callowness? Of course, there is more than one explanation for it. However, I argue that the most important reason is that our society has never seen fit to educate its women, who are and have always been a central part of the family and society. In our Korean society, women have traditionally been confined to the inner chambers, deprived of any freedom, kept in check to either kowtow or smile demurely, even constrained from the natural growth of their bodies. In the name of fulfilling her womanly duties, she has been expected to prepare for ancestral worship rituals, serve her parents-in-law, obey her husband, raise her children, and maintain harmonious relationships with her relatives. She has also been expected to be an expert at sewing, weaving, and cooking.

All families wanted to see these qualities in their mothers, wives, and daughters as a reflection of ideal womanhood. Also, people insisted on the so-called “Three Bondages,” through which women were subordinated like slaves and expected to obey men. As a result, women had neither responsibilities in society nor rights in the family. Their only lot in life was to sacrifice themselves for their husbands and parents-in-law. Having heard this description, some may still claim that the lives of Korean women have been simple and comfortable. However, any Korean woman who bothers to reflect upon her past cannot help but feel victimized. It is because, as I have described above, women lived without any goals beyond the boundaries of the traditional womanly ways and duties and never had a chance to develop their minds or pursue their own ideals. They learned only to rely on others, owing to the constraints imposed on them by the Three Bondages. There had never been any need to educate women in Korea. The result was women living like lackeys in blind obedience, under the unfair reign of men. Worse yet, those miserable Korean women simply accepted their subordinated life because they remained uneducated, deprived of self-awareness, strategy, or ability. A woman considered herself fortunate if she was not badly abused by her parents-in-law or treated coldly (in a sexual sense) by her husband. If she were not lucky in her marriage, she was bound to suffer mistreatment from her parents-in-law and endure deep sorrow under the control of a despotic husband. If she ever complained about any aspect of her existence, she would be accused of committing the “Seven Sins” or failing to fulfill her womanly duties. In the end, her life and spirit would be completely shattered.

All customs and morals have been made to privilege men only. Once a woman fell into a sad situation, she was prevented from trying to find a bright new life. Following the axiom, “a faithful wife never submits herself to two husbands,” a widow who remarried was a complete social outcast. Even her children suffered severe scorn, and they were not allowed to serve as officers in the government, completely ending any hope for future success. As a result, these women could not find a place in society that openly accepted them, which deepened their despair and pain. In the end, their misery led to suicide. Given this reality, how many tens of thousands of women have decried their miserable destiny and ended their lives over the past 4,000 years of Korean history? Is this just one individual woman’s misery? Far from it. It is an unfortunate society that has unfortunate women. It is an unfortunate country that has unfortunate women.

Korean men have felt content with women’s politeness and obedience, and they have fallen into the trap of their expectations from custom that have led to laziness and the utmost feebleness. Since they have lost their competition for survival, our families have turned out to be unsound, our society has remained unenlightened, and our nation has proved to be pathetic. Women also bear some responsibility for this situation, as they lacked self-awareness and ideals for life. However, the fundamental problem is that society did not allow women’s education.

Having said that, I expect to hear some people ask if newly educated women in Korea [nowadays] have had any accomplishments. I would say they have not because of the present condition of society. We are in a situation where society does not provide any options for educated women; therefore, there is no difference between educated and ignorant women in terms of their behavior. There are many women who are highly educated, striving to realize their lofty ideals and ambitious goals; however, our society has not developed to a level that understands and utilizes these women. In addition, our families have not reached a point where women are appreciated and welcome. These women are like undiscovered treasure, gold and jade buried in the soil, or pearls submerged under the deep sea.
Controversy over “schoolgirls”

The more civilized our society becomes, the higher the quality of our families will be. The stronger men’s passion for work is, the higher the demand for educated women will be. As we face the present era in which the level of culture is rising and social phenomena are becoming more complicated, I strongly advocate that our foremost need is women’s education, in order to create a dynamic society and also to have peaceful families, as other societies do.

19 Problems regarding uniforms and school badges for schoolgirls [excerpt]

[“Yó haksæng chebok kwa kyop’yo munje,” Sin yǒsòng 1, no. 2 (1923): 18–20]

Human intelligence and ability can certainly be improved. Human beings have not reached their apex in the hundreds of thousands of years of their existence, and one cannot say humans are satisfied with their current state. If they are, it is merely a temporary state of satisfaction based on an exaggerated estimate of what they have achieved. In reality, there is always something to aspire to. We may not realize this truth as we live our lives today, but our descendants will regard what we take to be fine and good as completely unsatisfactory. That is why I say, if people long for the development of the nation, they must have their children educated, for they will be the next generation of citizens responsible for the health of our country.

Now our nation has realized that education cannot be the exclusive domain of men. Women also need to be educated. We have come to the realization that women’s education is particularly crucial because mothers have the most significant influence on their children’s learning. However, we need to improve our initial steps toward women’s education, and we should be aware that women’s education is embedded with a certain amount of danger. By the way, did you know there is an evil in the present world of women’s education? This concern is rarely seen in other countries, but there is enormous anxiety that the boundaries between prostitutes (t’angnyǒ) and schoolgirls (yǒhaksæng) have eroded. In other words, entertainers (kisaeng) imitate the demeanor of schoolgirls, and prostitutes wear the clothing of schoolgirls. This sorry trend came into practice before we even realized it.

Some may take this matter lightly, while others may argue that bringing it up is an offense to schoolgirls and a cause for parents to worry. However, we call your attention to this sad situation because we need to stop these unseemly practices as we start down the path to comprehensive women’s education.

In public gatherings, theaters, trains, or on the streets, entertainers, prostitutes, and women of ill repute, who are nothing like schoolgirls, freely mingle with them. There should be a bright line between these two groups, but these debauched women going around dressed up as schoolgirls have muddied the boundary.

Unlike strong-willed men, schoolgirls lack the ability to discern bad from good. They may think of these bad women as their own kind because of the similar dress and end up hanging around with them. One can easily imagine the trouble that weak-minded schoolgirls might get into, coerced by the temptations offered by these indecent women. Also, when parents witness the unsavory behavior of prostitutes in school uniforms, they will conclude that that is how schoolgirls typically behave. This unfortunate situation, in turn, brings about the condemnation of women’s education. Even we, who have received “new education,” cannot tell the prostitutes from the schoolgirls, and when we see these women, the moral decline among schoolgirls is the first thing that comes to mind. If that is the case, then how can stubborn old parents possibly distinguish one from the other? How could they not see these things as a sign of the great moral decline of schoolgirls? It is under these circumstances that the enterprise of women’s education comes under severe criticism and suspicion.

20 Hö Chōngsuk: To girl students returning to their homes in the countryside [excerpt]

[“Hyangch’on e toraga núm yǒhaksæng chegun ege,” Sin yǒsòng 3, no. 8 (1925): 2–5]

Greetings to You All! Korea has a five-thousand-year history, but it is only in recent years that it began to produce enlightened women like you. You are truly the treasure of Korea and the backbone of its future. And because of that, you can’t afford to be careless or absent-minded simply because you are students. There’s no time for leisure. Think about it: how many girls in Korea have had the good fortune to receive the education that you have? Who else should be expected to tackle the innumerable problems surrounding us?

Of all the possible contributing factors, the one important reason why so many women, even those with wills of iron, have had little opportunity for education is that we are in an economic wreck. Then again, even if they’re from a family with means, their stubborn and conservative parents forbid them from attending school. There are a countless number of women just like them in every corner of the country. So, when you return to your hometowns, you’ll find that you’re considered the luckiest among us and the most highly valued pioneers. You’re likely to find that you’re the subject of envy and admiration from all women yearning for learning. They have high expectations of you. They have great faith in the big role you’ll play and the new influence you’ll have on our society.

You find yourselves in fortunate circumstances where you can learn how to sow, cultivate, and harvest by reading a book rather than actually going out into the fields, standing alongside men as they pull weeds, getting burned by the hot sun. No doubt such an experience would lead you to sympathize with them, and this is the reality you must now face. You can’t let your education
that the morality that had been imposed on women was a socially and culturally constructed device of the patriarchal system to control women’s bodies and minds (Source 47). This argument draws sharp attention to the very heart of the Confucian, patrilineal gender system, which places bodily “purity” and “chastity” at the pinnacle of ideal womanhood. One consistent theme embedded in the new discourse on chastity is the idea that the core element of chastity is not actually the body but rather true love and the individual pursuit of happiness. As Paek Ch’ol advocates for a new notion of chastity, contending that chastity exists only when love continues between man and woman, so chastity is irrelevant in the absence of love, and thus a woman who divorces and later remarries can still be chaste in her new relationship. Only true love and affectionate marriage can demand chastity (see also Sources 44 and 45).

Body politics also touched on the issue of birth control. Yun Sŏngsang pointedly challenges the widespread perception that birth control is a dangerous and sinful act that promotes promiscuity and destroys the family (Source 48). Quoting extensively from the work of Margaret Sanger, a well-known advocate of birth control, Yun delineates the strong desire that had characterized women of all ages from all lands for limits on the family that would permit “aspiration toward freedom” to “develop herself as an individual, apart from motherhood.” Yun urges the public to pay more attention to raising “healthy children” rather than sheer numbers and also to women’s health, which is so closely tied up with their reproductive choices. As shown in the interview with Chŏng Sŏkt’ae, a German-educated medical doctor who lays out various methods of birth control, “scientific” knowledge about the female body and reproductive practices support the validity of the modern ways of family planning (Source 49).

Hair was also a focal point in defining modern “feminine beauty,” and short hair often signified the Modern Girl and the New Woman (Sources 50 and 51). Many intellectuals participated in the debate about short hair. Its advocates see short hairstyles as the starting point for women’s liberation and emphasize the benefits in terms of convenience, hygiene, time savings, and playfulness. In contrast, its opponents consider short hair to be a sign of vanity, Westernization, and the senseless pursuit of vogue. Similarly, women’s fashion also sparked much discussion. Yun Sŏngsang’s essay on the style of the modern woman outlines not only what the general public imagines when it comes to women in vogue—wavy permed hair, colorful clothing, high heels, and sensual make-up—but also what the ideal modern woman should be concerned about (Source 52). She argues that fashion is an inevitable trend in any time and place, reflecting human nature to pursue something new and beautiful. What one should avoid, she further argues, is the blind pursuit of fashion trends that ruthless merchants slyly manipulate.

43 Kim Wŏnju: My view on chastity

[“Na ūi chŏngjogwŏn,” Chosŏn ilbo January 8, 1927]

The conventional view on chastity sees it as a material object. From this viewpoint, if a woman had sexual relations prior to marriage, her love is considered shabby, lacking purity and freshness. In other words, if she had a sexual relationship with a man even once, her chastity is already tainted. It is broken and thus useless, like a broken bowl that is made of precious jewels.

However, chastity is far from a fixed matter. Chastity gains its meaning only when one loves someone. If she is no longer in love with him, she is no longer obliged to keep her chastity for him. Just like the emotion of love, one can argue that chastity is fluid and always fresh. Chastity is not a moral concept imposed on a woman, but the ultimate expression of her emotions and passion for her lover. Chastity, which is the emotion of instinct, cannot be found without love. Even if a woman has had loving relationships with several partners, we can say that she has true chastity as long as she has a healthy spirit to create new life, washes away past memories, and is ready to devote her new and pure self to a new lover.

However, I think that love is not an easy matter. Before a woman says, “I love you,” she has to think deeply over [what it means to love] and prepare herself. First, if a woman had a loving relationship in the past, she should ask if there are any remnants of impure emotions from her past relationship. She should ask herself if she is a pure person with a new spirit and body, and also if there is even a tiny trace deep down in her mind of emotion for her former lover. After reflecting and feeling certain of her love toward her new lover, she can embrace him with the confidence that she is pure and chaste. If she seeks a new lover and life with even a speck of an impure thought, she will end up unfaithful to him and defiling her own life. Therefore, she should give up seeking a new lover if there is any hint of impurity within her mind.

Chastity is not a duty imposed on women only. Anyone who wastes her precious time on a sentimental view of life by focusing on unrequited love or a broken heart is narrow-minded and unable to create a new life. She also sins against herself because she is not being honest with herself. However, it is a different matter to take comfort in adoring and respecting a man as if he were a religious figure, as long as she does not abandon or destroy her life.

As I described above, chastity must be accompanied by love. At the same time, the idea of chastity should be fresh forever, as human passion is unlimited. Chastity is just like a boundless mind. One cannot argue that chastity is a limited emotion that can be tainted. Chastity can never be a virtue in itself. It is only the climax of a consciousness that invigorates a passionate love. We can say that people who try to live at the zenith of love consciousness throughout their lives (regardless of changing partners) have the right perspective on chastity. Therefore, when a man or woman with a past enters into a new relationship, but constantly feels their passion has been tainted by
the loss of their virginity, they insult their own integrity and passion. An experienced man or woman insults his or her integrity and passion by finding a new lover while agonizing over whether he or she is still chaste or tainted. We should strive to have pride in our chastity and always preserve our virginity. Here, virginity does not mean the ridiculous habit of lowering one’s face out of shyness in front of the opposite sex. It is about one’s firm authority over chastity; in other words, it is a woman’s claim that she possesses a new spirit and body that are pure and never diminishing. There are some women who tend to think that, once they have had a sexual relationship, their chastity is forever contaminated. They give up on their lives, ruthlessly engaging in sexual relationships because they believe their bodies are dirty. I think that they are under the influence of a trite, old concept of chastity.

We New Women and New Men are trying to bring to attention the new meaning of life, which is vastly different from the old institutions, traditions, and concepts. We rebel ardently against old sexual ethics that ignore our character and individuality. Although they seem out of date, the names of “Ibsen” and “Helen Keller” resonate with us. We need to reject old sexual norms and oppose the trite conception of chastity. Yet, it does not mean that we endorse the pursuit of careless sexual relationships out of curiosity and bodily desires. I think that we should make the utmost effort to keep our purity and try hard to establish new sexual morals.

I remember writing a piece on chastity in a woman’s magazine a few years ago. At the time, I had not found a clear opinion on this topic, and I am still not satisfied with my view. In any case, I will continue to think about a new concept of chastity.

44 Roundtable: A debate on chastity

[“Chisang chǒngjo munje nonuí,” Sin yŏsŏng 6, no. 3 (1932): 24–32]

Yu Kwangyŏl: On chastity for men [“Namja chǒngjoron”]

When we speak of men’s chastity, we need to make a distinction between men’s virginity (tongjǒng) and chastity (chǒngjo). Virginity means having no sexual relations before marriage. Chastity means maintaining fidelity to one’s wife after marriage and abstaining from sexual interest in any other woman. We can see examples of the former among those who marry late and examples of the latter among married men. Married men can resolve their sexual urges with their wives and not get involved with other women if they have strong wills; however, those who do not have strong wills can be tempted by other women. In contrast, unmarried men do not have wives to satisfy their urges, and so their virginity tends to be easily broken. I think it may be a reason why society tends to be more generous in cases of unmarried men losing their virginity than those of married men having affairs. Now, if we apply this logic to women, violations of the conventions of either virginity or chastity are both treated as matters of chastity.

There are many people who do not think chastity is an important issue, but I think it would be better to consider it as a significant matter. A husband’s chastity toward his wife and a wife’s chastity toward her husband are like the trust maintained between friends. No matter how many changes occur, trust among friends is essential for a collective life in society.

Society requires women to be chaste. It should have the same requirement for men. From the standpoint of mutual trust and gender equality, it is not only plausible, but absolutely necessary, to demand chastity of both women and men. The present legal system permits divorce if a wife commits adultery, but it is not so if a husband commits adultery. In the future, a condition for divorce should be a violation of chastity for both the husband and wife. This new legal practice should overrule old customs, following scholarly and rational thinking.

In the view of morality and the law, only when men and women are chaste can they maintain peace in the family and obtain much greater happiness. However, whether the marriage was arranged or self-selected, a couple’s life and pursuit of happiness are shackled by chastity if they no longer love each other, condemning them to pain and affliction. Facing the fetters of chastity, they should clearly opt for freedom. The only thing to note here is that men still have the economic power, and thus women suffer much more from these chastity-related matters. There should be a correct solution to this problem. Only after we find a solution can we deal with the issue of chastity correctly.

Sin Yŏngch’ŏl, “Problems in the chastity of a wife” [“In ch’ŏ chǒngjo munje”]

“Chastity is a woman’s life.” Of course, this phrase comes from old feudal times. However, I do not want to talk about woman’s chastity from the simple view of “a chaste woman does not serve two men.” The issue of chastity matters because men and women are husbands and wives. It is wrong to impose chastity on women and expect chastity from the wives of other men. If women are told to remain chaste, men should be told the same thing. If wives are expected to stay chaste, the same should be expected of husbands. However, it is still true that people do not consider male chastity to be a relevant issue, while female chastity is required. A husband taking a concubine or having an affair is tolerated, even supported, but a wife surrendering chastity causes an uproar. She is never forgiven. There is a clear contradiction here. There has not yet been a man courageous enough to say that, as long as men are free to have affairs without any criticism, a woman should have the same freedom. Women should demand, “Husbands, if you expect chastity from your wife, you should follow that dictate for yourself.”

Anyway, chastity! Women must carefully think through this huge moral issue. No matter how intelligent a woman may be, if she is not chaste and leads a scandalous life, regardless of the noble arguments she may make in her own
Politics of the body

at the longest. Anything longer wouldn’t be good—the shorter, the better. However, it’s also a matter of degree and intensity [of the relationship]. I’m just saying that the degree shouldn’t be excessive.

Next, parents must understand the character and behavior of their children. It isn’t good to let them act freely; however, it isn’t any better to tightly control their behavior. Even if parents respect the opinions of their children, parental supervision is inevitable because these children are still young and passionate. I think parents shouldn’t give them too much time to interact during the engagement, but have them marry soon instead. To reiterate, those who have sex during their engagement are most likely to break up before marriage.

Chŏng Sŏkt’ae (M.D. degree from Germany): Change in body and destructive end (“Yuk’h’e ū pyŏnhwa wa p’agyong”)

I’m a doctor. I want to answer the question from a medical point of view. In the case of a woman who has had sex with her fiancé, but her engagement is eventually nullified, we have to first investigate whether her body was seriously damaged.

Some physical changes occur when a virgin woman has sex. Her breasts enlarge, her buttocks become round, and her voice gets hoarse. However, these symptoms are only temporary. Once she returns to normal, her buttocks flatten, and any changes in her breasts are hardly visible. But is the man’s semen buried deep in her blood forever and passed down to her descendants? This isn’t so. The semen is dissolved in the blood and becomes traceless. So, medically speaking, if she was engaged to a man A and had sex with him, but eventually married a man B, her descendants would be entirely B’s, without physical traces of A. Of course, it’s a separate matter if she suffers emotional scars from her past experience.

A doctor at Kyushu University had a visit from a young New Woman for a medical consultation. She told him that she had had sex with her fiancé, but they had broken up before marriage. She now has a family with a different man. She came to see the doctor because she had been agonizing about confessing to her husband that she wasn’t a virgin when they married. This is similar to this magazine’s survey question. In this situation, the doctor contemplated the issue seriously and told her that her former lover’s blood wasn’t transmitted and didn’t affect her children’s genes. If her husband already had a clue about her past, it would be better for her to confess and seek forgiveness. However, if he didn’t know, she shouldn’t confess. Judging from male psychology, the doctor believed the confession would make her husband demand a divorce and lead to the destruction of her family. This is true. I agree with the doctor.

I’ve observed German cases while studying there for several years. In Germany, the typical engagement lasts one or two years. As it’s a culturally advanced country, most people marry, and it’s rare to see an engagement broken. Although social ethics tell people to keep their chastity during the engagement, most people don’t follow these dictates, and most women do have sex with their fiancé. I think it’s still better for Korean women to keep their chastity. However, I think a kiss or hug is fine.

46 Na Hyesŏk: Starting a new life [excerpt]


Seduction

It was the snake’s seduction and Eve’s own curiosity that made her take the forbidden fruit, and God’s punishment was severe. There is nothing like the combination of fear and exhilaration that one gets from seduction. The pleasure, restlessness, fear, and anxiety that seduction brought me were the same as curiosity would have brought. No matter what the impetus was, the widely flung open world made me mysteriously happy. How could I not have a sense of freedom as someone who had an unrestrained and serious mind? I was obviously lured and absolutely curious. We [Na Hyesŏk and Ch’oe Rin] discovered a rose in the midst of a stark and desolate road. The sweet intimacy enraputured us, like bees attracted to the fragrance of that rose. It didn’t matter what the result might be. I surrendered myself to that experience as a necessary step for me to grow.

People mature in many different ways. Not a few people live in a happy environment, under conditions without worry or suffering. However, the majority of people are likely to succumb to difficult situations before they mature. Then, wouldn’t it be all right if they tried to live with singular conviction, regardless of how they were crushed, deluded, or broken? Look at the stream water frozen in winter. How could such dirty water turn pure white and beautiful when it’s frozen? It’s because the water never lost its purity and beauty. This truth causes me think of a person who is making progress in her life. To her, the dirtier the water is, or the greater the temptation is, the more she can understand the complex and profound reality. More hardships might make her appear troubled on the outside, but she’ll be able to live with an unfathomable emotional depth inside. And she just embraces such hardships as ordinary matters of life.

Chastity

Chastity involves neither morals nor laws. It’s merely taste. Just as we eat rice (p’ab) when we want to eat rice, and we eat rice cake (tiŏk) when we want to eat rice cake, chastity depends on our will and practice. We shouldn’t be constrained. Taste is kind of enigmatic. It can find goodness in evil and laughter in ugliness. Although we’re bound by something external, our mind can be completely free, experiencing no suffering but only exhilaration and satisfaction. This state of mind is not about objectivity but subjectivity, not
unconsciousness but consciousness. In the end, our mind discovers artistic taste, and our behavior is colored by such taste. In the West, they’ve offered sex education at girls’ schools since the early nineteenth century. People may say the culture in Paris is promiscuous, but the reason their culture doesn’t look evil or ugly is because Parisians are already aware of sexual relationships and consider sex to be a matter of taste. They turn their actions into art.

Nonetheless, chastity is necessary for our personal integrity and the unity of life. We can freely regard chastity as a matter of taste, but we must recognize the pain that can be caused to others by a loose sense of chastity. Chastity is also vital to sustain our survival. Therefore, the more temptation one finds in society, the more caution one needs in order to guard against it. Those who are cautious and focused can achieve integrity in their conduct and spirit. Chastity was imposed only on women for centuries, but I think it should be applied to men, too.

In order to keep our chastity, we often suppress our natural playfulness, our irresistible passion, and our point of view. How ironic is that? Our real liberation begins with our liberation from chastity. I believe we have to see a reality in which sexual anarchy makes some people want to remain chaste. In Paris, where sexual anarchy prevails, there are men and women who are celibate. They do this after they have already experienced everything and choose to return to old-fashioned ways. Like Parisians, we need to experience everything and then choose whatever suits us best. This practice is more appropriate and not as dangerous.

If a stream of water is forced to go in one direction, it inevitably bursts into multiple directions. Even fierce waves of water are bound to disperse. This is nature. Who could possibly stop a force of nature?

47 Paek Ch’ŏl: A new view on chastity [excerpt]

[“Sin chŏngjoron,” Yŏsŏng 4, no. 3 (March 1939): 12–15]

What really is so-called chastity (chŏngio)? Starting from this general question, what first comes to mind is what people have called “virginity” (ch’ŏnyŏsŏng). From time immemorial, virginity has been regarded as a sacred privilege for women, and men have eulogized it as a sacred domain. Virginity was symbolic of pure chastity, which a woman held on to until she married. If a woman had her virginity taken away by force, she was more than ready to commit suicide because her virginity was precious, and her life was worthless without it.

Yet, is virginity really as precious, sacred, and priceless as it has been? I think that we need to revisit the issue of virginity with a rational mind. In my view, eulogizing virginity is a kind of mysticism stemming from customs of the old past. I cannot see it as anything other than sentimentalism because there is no substantial reason or scientific basis to support it.

People often say that, once a woman gives her body to a man, her blood gets cloudy and dirty. However, this is only a superstition. Obviously, there is no scientific proof that sexual intercourse with a man will result in a dirty body or impure blood. It is also a widely shared view in the scientific community that virginity can be identified through medical examination, but there is no standard measurement for that. In Rama [Rome] of ancient times, a groom would measure the size of his bride’s neck before they spent their wedding night together, and then measure it again in the morning. If it got thicker, it was proof of her virginity. Of course, this is also a superstition and has no basis in fact.

To be sure, women experience physical and biological changes after marriage. The general belief is that female physical and mental functions become active after marriage, but that is just one biological condition. It is intrinsically meaningless to argue that married life would make one’s blood cloudy or one’s body impure. Thus, I think that it is ridiculous and illogical to consider virginity an absolute virtue and equate it with life. It does not mean that I happily endorse youth’s debauchery. I still regard the purity of unmarried ladies as precious. What I am arguing is that we need to eliminate groundless exaggeration and mythical sentimentalism in our understanding of virginity. Furthermore, there is no basis or rationale for an unwed woman to end her life if she has lost her virginity owing to unfortunate circumstances.

When we refute the absoluteness of virginity, the next question is how to understand the possibility of remarriage for women. In the East, the injunction that a virtuous woman never serves two husbands has been the prevalent view. As a consequence, obedience to one husband was the only choice women had, and that was the social norm. Unlike now, a woman divorcing her husband and serving another one was unthinkable behavior. It was out of the question for a widow to remarry after her husband’s death. Even for a very young woman, the only option that was considered appropriate was for her to remain a widow for the rest of her life.

A woman keeping her chastity for only one man, never two, has been the dominant view of chastity in the East. However, this way of thinking was contradictory and unfair because men were allowed to remarry, while women were forced to remain chaste. It was an evil custom in a male-dominated society. In fact, virginity or chastity was completely unimportant to a collective married life in the primitive era. Chastity became important only when there was a shift from a collective, property-based society toward a private, property-centered society, and patriarchy grew to have more power than matriarchy. Therefore, in the issue of chastity, preventing remarriage and forcing widows to remain chaste reveal the most contradictory custom and feudal ethical practices.

It is this feudal morality that must be tackled as a social problem. Regardless of widowhood or divorce, the option of remarriage for women conforms to the law of nature, the way of humanity, and the avowed path for women. It is, of course, necessary for women to recognize this issue. At the same time, I believe that society should also acknowledge it as the legitimate and proper practice. The majority of men still tend to be hesitant and frown on
However, I soon came to the realization that crying would not lead me anywhere in the accomplishment of my goals. I began to learn the language at the equivalent of a middle school in a rural community. After studying the language for several months, I was admitted to the Department of Political Economy at Stockholm University in the following fall. In the beginning, I did not find much interest in the subjects, but I gradually discovered an unlimited pleasure in learning. The university, of course, was co-educational. My fellow students were very kind to me, but they did not know that I was Korean. They did not even know that Korea was a country. When I told them I was Korean and Koreans had a different language from Swedish, they thought I was lying. However, after a while, they became more aware of Korea, and we became closer and friendlier. I began to discover the fun of living in a foreign country, and my initial impression of the bleak scenery of Sweden changed. Now, it looked much more beautiful than I had ever imagined. I kept reminding myself that I should do my best in my studies in a country that commanded such quiet, beautiful scenery. As in China, I had to support my studies in Sweden and myself, but I did not experience any extreme hardship. Along with my classmates, I went swimming in the summer and skiing in the winter. I had so much fun in life that I did not notice how time had flown. I really miss those days. To be sure, I had some difficult times earning the 100 won I needed every month to support my studies, but now I have forgotten all the pain and only remember the joys.

Sweden is a country of snow. The beauty of the snowy landscape cannot be found anywhere else. I recall ski outings in incredible, snow-covered panoramas, holding hands with a friend. During the summer, we would walk through the thick woods to wide-open fields covered with green grass and visit the beautiful lakes. Now these outings are only distant memories, and it breaks my heart that I cannot return there.

Happy times pass very quickly, before we even realize it. It has already been one year since I left the school in Stockholm where I had so much fun. I could let my four years of study in Nanjing pass as a faint memory, but I cannot forget the four delightful years I had in Sweden. Surely, I will always remember how excited I was when I graduated and left the campus. But I am still heartbroken when I remember how sad it was to say goodbye to my friends.

During my twenty-month tour of Europe and the United States, this was my life: I wore my hair short and dressed in Western suits. I ate bread and drank tea. I slept in a bed. I attended an academy of art, carrying a paint box for sketching. I memorized French vocabulary. Sometimes I dreamt about romance and imagined becoming an eminent artist. I danced when I felt like it, and I went to the theater when I had time. I attended parties with kings and foreign ministers from other countries. I visited revolutionaries and met women suffragists. I had a taste of what it was like to be in a French family. I experienced all of these things as a woman, a student, and a lady (ch'önyö). I didn’t encounter any economic or moral barriers in experiencing these things, which wouldn’t have been the case for a woman in Korea. I felt exhilarated, even on the ship crossing the Pacific Ocean.

On my way back home, when I arrived in Yokohama, I noticed that my perceptions had changed. Houses resembled woodsheds, streets smelled like ditches, and people’s faces were yellow and their backs were bent like shrimps. When I got back to Chosön (Korea), I found the dirt-filled streets to be very disagreeable. The pounding sound of people doing ironing seemed forlorn, coming from a flat house that looked like a mushroom. And the people dressed in white walking feebly through the streets made me feel pity. The experience of my return to Korea was like that of a flower in full bloom being tossed about by the wind. My full confidence and pleasant mood began to wither like a dried, shrunked leaf.

My life after return

What about my life after I returned to Chosön? I quickly grew my hair long and gave up my short Western dress for a long skirt. When I ate Korean dishes, I felt breathless, and my stomach burst into flames. The bedding seemed to be too hard, and the clutter around the house was an eyesore. I made side dishes in the kitchen and sewed in the ondol room. My husband’s family and relatives lectured me on my obligations, my mother-in-law on filial devotion, and my sister-in-law on money. Ah, I had no memory of what had happened in the past, nor any comprehension of what was happening at the present moment. I was so disoriented that it even felt strange when my children called me “mother.” I felt I was still living in a nightmare from which I hadn’t yet woken. No one but truly knows how much I was struggling to wake up from that awful dream.

When I saw Michelangelo’s scenes from Genesis on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome and stood in front of the grave of Goya, the genius painter from Spain, more than a sense of hope erupted in my mind. After viewing many paintings during my tour, I was left with two impressions. The first was that the paintings were absolutely wonderful. The second was that they were difficult. I believed that as long as I held on to these impressions, I couldn’t improve my skills in painting.
Also, I clearly realized that I was a woman (I had always felt I was gender-neutral). And I realized that women were remarkable, happy beings. I understood everything on earth was under women’s power. Once I realized these things, I was able to see the value not only in big things but also in small matters, and I wanted to share this knowledge with all Koreans.

After returning from the tour, I had to live with my in-laws and their relatives for a year. It wasn’t easy to obey what they wanted me to do because I had my own desires. However, the agony and the mistreatment I endured was inevitable because I was eight-months pregnant at the time I returned. After I gave birth, it took a year to raise the baby. I also needed time to rest and come to terms with all of the thoughts and ideas that crowded my mind.

When I observe the things around me, I notice many similarities in behaviors and attitudes in Paris and Chosôn. The only difference may be that the former (Paris) one finds extremely well-developed social skills, while in the latter (Chosôn) such skills are underdeveloped and primitive. I feel more warmth and affinity toward the latter. People say knowledge is a disease. My un消化 knowledge often leads me to a certain partiality. Whenever I detect this bad tendency, I reflect upon myself. At the same time, I find myself drawn to the warmth and familiarity of the Korean style.

In addition, I have come to think more about how to live with others in harmony. I found that the core element of Parisian sociality and Korean peasants’ primitiveness is self-constraint. Even though everyone is an individual, one can’t simply prioritize one’s own needs. I sincerely realized that peasant women’s self-denial is a womanly virtue, and their ability to embrace everyone for the sake of familial harmony is something we should learn in our own growth toward maturity. What I see in peasant women’s lives and actions is that they aren’t surrendering themselves to their environment, but rather they do what they can within the circumscribed conditions.

Three frightening things

Nevertheless, I don’t like the passivity that I see in peasant women. I don’t like ambiguous situations and impassive attitudes. I dislike people who have no clear individuality. In times of social transition, people want to see others change, but they themselves are not free from conventional practices. They want others to be at the frontlines of change. They may criticize those who stand out in the process of change, but they actually show respect for those people. I think we need proactive people. But I wonder if it’s plausible to see people who come out of the particular circumstances of life in Korea make such a great leap.

From my own observations and from what I hear here and there, I have reached a conclusion. There are three frightening things in this world. First, people are frightening. Second, money is frightening. And, third, the world itself is frightening. The fact is, a person can go anywhere and do anything if he or she has money. There is nothing to stop someone from doing what he or she wants or becoming whatever he or she desires, but the world can be an awful place once one gets to know it, and, as a consequence, we lose our courage. Can everyone claim to be a human being? We become human beings only after we act like human beings. It takes so much time, experience, and suffering for us to become human. Who doesn’t know how precious money could be? Especially we Koreans know this very well because we hear the cry for money everywhere. Those who have money look energetic, but those who don’t have drooping shoulders. If we didn’t have money, how could we travel to Italy, France, and other places?

In this world, there are all kinds of society. On this side of the world, people long for things that are available on the other side of the world, and vice versa. It’s hard to judge which world is better, if one has only a little knowledge. After all, we are destined to come back to our own places. We end up returning to our places, whether or not we know something about other places. I have learned and experienced all these things. We strive to gain something out of the three things that frighten us when we take action in our lives.

In instrumental drawings, lines are used to create the impression of shapes and dimensions. Living in a culture blinds one to a full appreciation of all of its aspects. When I was living in the West, I could only see the shapes of the West and the dimensions of Korea. After I returned to Korea, the opposite was true. I could only see the shapes of Korea and the dimensions of the West. Just as the combination of shapes and dimensions creates the full impression of the thing, a society becomes complete only after its external and internal aspects are put together. We can’t separate one from the other. Visitors to a society with limited time won’t be able to develop an understanding of the internal dynamics of a society whose complexity and density can’t be revealed quickly. Therefore, my travels revealed only a few things that I could gather from the surface of the societies.

How different are the lifestyles of Westerners and Koreans? I’d say it’s analogous to differences in how we eat. Westerners digest food thoroughly, chewing it and appreciating its flavors, whereas we Koreans just swallow food all at once, without tasting it at all. Of course, all the food ends up as feces, regardless of how we eat it, but the whole process that precedes its transformation into feces is drastically different. Westerners know the taste of life. They learn how to enjoy life. When they work, they work really hard, but, when they play, they passionately enjoy their leisure. When they are emotional about something, they get fired up. When they put their intelligence and reasoning to use, they’re as cold as ice. Even if their charm, gentleness, and benevolence are mere social affect, it is impossible to resist them. Westerners wear clothes according to their own individual tastes. There is abundant creativity. If there is something unusual in style, they value it and respect people who try something new. Novelty is encouraged, and, as a result, such societies foster creativity and move forward with innovations.

What about the Korean way of life? Things are always boring, and day after day there is nothing new. We don’t separate reason from emotion. When people
see something strange, they rain down curses and slander upon it. They ridicule and stifle new practices. No creative work can be done in this environment. Without the creativity of individuals in society, there’s no progress.

Although I don’t have a lot of knowledge, once I was exposed to the world, I realized how primitive and backward Korean rural communities were, seeming to be two or three centuries behind the West. I couldn’t help but find shortcomings in our society. When I returned to Korea, I felt I came to a foreign land. I must have looked like a half-witted person because I could no longer communicate with my countrymen in the same way, even though I was making a sincere effort to be understood by my family and community.

My goals during my tour to Europe

When I was about to leave for Europe, I thought about the purpose of my trip. I had been anxious about four questions: 1. What would be the best way to live? 2. How could man and woman live in harmony? 3. What is the status of women? 4. What is the essence of painting? Once I arrived in Europe, I considered two options. One was to stay in one place and try to get recognition for my paintings in the Paris art salons, and the other was to accompany my husband on a sightseeing tour of many countries. I chose the latter. We were able to visit nine countries within a short period of time. As we were moving so quickly from one place to the next, things got confusing, and I couldn’t keep straight what I had seen in which country. On top of that, after I gave birth to my child (after returning to Korea), I became very ill. I felt like I was desperately trying to get something, but it was all in vain. I think this happened because I didn’t have a solid background of knowledge to prepare me for the experience. But, as time passes, I’m gradually making sense of things.

February 10 was the first anniversary of my return to Korea. What is heartbreaking is that, despite all the money, time, and passion I put into the trip, my memory of it is getting dimmer and dimmer. Sometimes I’ll wake up in the middle of the night from a dream that stirs my memory, and I’ll stay up until dawn, recollecting those days. Ah, I miss the freedom, equality, and benevolence in Paris . . .

I have a serious flaw—an inability quietly to accept things. I envy those who have a talent for blending in, but I don’t have that capacity. I very much dislike this aspect of myself, but that’s how I was born, and there’s nothing I can do about it. I stubbornly try to integrate what I see, hear, and learn into my experience. In other words, I’m satisfied only after I’ve mastered those innovations. I don’t like to do things simply because there is some conventional requirement. Rather, I tend to be content only when I find meaning in something and enjoy doing it. Therefore, after having left Korea and lived in another part of the world, I came to the acute realization that, in order to return to the Korean lifestyle, I really needed to experience Korean rural life. How badly did I need to understand rural life? I sometimes wonder why our heads are not as big as the bell in Chongno in order to contain all of the knowledge we need. This is especially true for Korean women. How intricate are their lives, with multiple layers of complication?

The storm has passed. How cheerful are the trees and plants, with the clear sky showing through. Brutal winter has come back. The world is covered with white snow. How beautiful, pure, and peaceful is the snow-covered horizon, off in the distance. However, underneath the beautiful, flat surface are innumerable winding curves.

58 Pak Indök: My observations of a rural community in Germany

["Nae ka pon Togil nongch’on,” Samch’öll 4, no. 4 (April 1932): 66–69]

After World War I, Germany faced the complete bankruptcy of its economy. However, at least on the surface, the Germans’ livelihood looked absolutely normal, and their behavior and outer expression seemed most upbeat and vigorous. I was impressed with their positive displays of confidence, but I also became curious as to where that confidence came from. After thinking about it for some time, I decided to visit Germany. The Germans’ exceptional talent in mechanical engineering and their musical genius made a strong impression on me. But what truly amazed me was their courage and thoroughness. The German people are good at organization. Whatever they do, they first try to get a grip on the whole situation and anticipate any difficulties that might come about. Once they have considered every possibility, they bravely dash to their target.

The German people also have a love of nature that seems greater than that of any other nation, and so, whenever the Germans find free time, they go hiking or just take a walk. This type of exercise makes Germans healthy and vigorous. During the reign of Caesar, Rome developed a culture more advanced than that of central Europe, but the Romans were crushed by the courage of the sturdy people who came out of the German woods like a swarm of bees. Everyone goes hiking with family and friends, no matter whether they are urbanites or peasants, men or women, young or old. Wearing simple hiking clothes, they take everything they might need—walking sticks, food, cooking utensils, water bottles, tents, books, musical instruments—and roll them into bundles that they carry on their backs. They go out to the open fields, mountains, oceans, small streams, and other sites of natural beauty, where they eat, play, and enjoy themselves all day long and then come back home late at night. One evening, I saw a group of boys and girls with packs on their backs and walking sticks in their hands. They sang as they dragged their tired, aching legs, looking utterly exhausted, yet completely content.

You can easily imagine the rural life in Germany, given the thoroughgoing character of the nature-loving Germans. When I look out the window of the
8 Korean women's movements
Coalition and division

Editor's introduction
There have been sporadic and small-scale women's organizations since the late nineteenth century. The experience accumulated through participation in the public sphere and the growing number of educated women and working professionals gradually helped women to organize themselves on a large scale to have a lasting impact. The March First Independence Movement of 1919, in particular, provided a critical impetus in advancing the women's movement because women gained significant experience through this nationwide movement. As a result, by 1923, there were 150 independent women's organizations, largely focused on education, enlightenment, and religion (Christianity) (Nam 1991: 205). In addition, the introduction of socialism in the early 1920s helped women better understand the theoretical and historical basis for the structural problems that caused gender oppression.

As was briefly noted in the Introduction, the Korean women's movements can be divided into three major branches: the liberal feminist group, the Christian group, and the socialist group. The pioneering organization for each of these groups was founded in the early 1920s. The establishment of Sin yöja, the first feminist magazine in Korea, by Kim Wönju and her colleagues in 1920, signaled the emergence of the liberal feminist movement. In 1922, the Korean Young Women's Christian Association was established by leading Christian women intellectuals as an internationally affiliated, nationwide organization. And the first socialist women's organization, Chosön yösǒng tonguhoehoe, was established in 1924, opening up a new path for the women's movement (Nam 1989: 29). In a significant way, the founding of Kūnuhoe (Friends of the Rose of Sharon) in 1927 was the culmination of the women's movements that first emerged in the late nineteenth century. It was the only organization that embraced women from a wide spectrum of ideologies and also a nationwide organization with many branches throughout the provinces.

This chapter offers translations of some of the representative declarations and opinions about the direction of the women's movement. Kim Wönju's article in Sin yöja captures core directives of the liberal feminist movement at the time (Source 60). It not only calls for a critical evaluation of old customs that had suppressed women's humanity for centuries, but also emphasizes women's own self-awakening in order to achieve physical and mental freedom. The "Declaration of the Establishment of Kūnuhoe" highlights social contradictions and antagonisms in which women had held a disadvantageous position throughout human history (Source 61). It locates the women's movement in tandem with broader social movements. More importantly, it warns that, "we must not forget about local particulars in privileging the universal and the general." Indeed, this special attention to local particularities Korean women faced in terms of the persistent power of feudal customs enabled women from across a diverse ideological spectrum to be united under Kūnuhoe, as they all engaged in the struggle against feudalism.

Socialist women, such as Chung Ch'ilsŏng, Ch'oe Ch'ŏnghŭi, and Kim Ùnhùi, make a sharp distinction between the experiences of women of the bourgeois class and the experiences of proletarian women. Highlighting the plight of the proletarian women in contrast to the comfortable and even pampered life of the bourgeois, Chung Ch'ilsŏng urges pioneering women to devote themselves to helping the most wretched class of women in society (Source 62). Ch'oe Ch'ŏnghŭi offers some insights into the ideological struggles within Kūnuhoe over what reforms should receive priority—either enlightenment or political strife and class struggle (Source 63). Indeed, Kūnuhoe failed to unite many religious members and "pure nationalist women" in the organization, which was led largely by socialist women. The significance of Kim Ùnhūi's essay is that she makes it clear that the liberal bourgeois women's movement in the West, with its central focus on the issue of suffrage, is not relevant in colonial Korea, and that, even in those countries that achieved women's suffrage, "female proletarians, laborers, and peasants aren't fully liberated from men, manufacturing capitalists, or landlords" (Source 65). In doing so, Kim brings to the fore the significance of class struggle as a priority for the women's movement in colonial Korea.

Finally, New Year's resolutions presented by a number of women offer a wide range of topics and issues that concerned these women (Source 64). Some emphasize the need to break the bondage that has restrained women, while others explore new possibilities for the future by actively participating in broader social transformations in the economy and politics. Some also draw attention to the need for better women's organizations that could guide and advance women by systematically engaging in social policies to protect them and provide them with equal opportunities.

60 Kim Wönju: Women's demands and arguments
/["Uri yöja ùi yögu wa chujang," Sin yöja 2 (1920): 6-7/]
We, the members of the Sin yöja Press, do not have much knowledge or experience. As such, how can we dare to come before society in the name of New Women? It's because we could not help but take the initiative. Look
around. The woman’s world in Korea is still incredibly young. Given this reality, we predict that there will be persecution and incessant criticisms against us. We have still decided to go forward because we know that, if we do not sacrifice ourselves to improve women’s lives now, our sisters will never have the chance to see the light, trapped as they are in the dark pit of their miserable lives.

What era are we living in? The world has arrived at a moment ripe for reform, and the dawn of a new civilization shines on the horizon. Can’t you hear the bells ringing to wake us from this long night’s dream? We have come forward to embrace this changing era. You may wonder what our demands are and what we argue for. Simply stated, it is this: we want women to break away from the old customs that have cruelly suppressed and constrained them for centuries. In doing so, women can be awakened as human beings and pursue their self-development. Men may consider such actions to be destructive, rebellious, or disloyal, but let’s face it: isn’t it true that men have not treated women as human beings and have trampled on them as though they were animals for centuries?

Where on earth could we possibly find a greater violation against humanity than this? Sure, one can fault women to some degree. However, reality has been shaped by ideas that assume men are at the center of everything. Men are honored; women are belittled. Men are considered physically and mentally superior; women are thought to be inferior. Based on these false beliefs, all social institutions and customs have placed men over women and have been organized to satisfy the interests of men. Furthermore, under the pretense of the evil custom called the Three Obediences (samjông), which were blatantly designed to force women to obey male desires, men have made women live their entire lives as mere appendages of their husbands and have used women as convenient objects for sexual gratification. Such customs have been designed to force women to comply with the demands of men. Women have been treated so badly in this male-centered society and have had to blindly obey men for so long that they have forgotten their innate nature and their duties as human beings. The savage practice of human trafficking has treated women like cattle, as a commodity. The alarming thing is that this practice has been considered normal. All of this is due to a lack of virtue on the part of men. Women have had to endure these insults because they had not developed self-awareness. Given this reality, we New Women must try to eradicate the customary moral beliefs that have been held for centuries and establish new, rational morals that do not impede gender equality. We desire to pursue all that life has to offer by cultivating ourselves with the freedom, the rights, the duties, the labor, and the pleasure that equality provides.

We believe that surrendering one’s mentality is equivalent to surrendering one’s body. If we want to free our minds, we must obtain freedom in a physical sense as well. The desire for physical freedom is first fed by the desire for mental freedom. Only after one passionately craves mental freedom can one develop a solid desire for material freedom. In this vein, the New Women are obliged to overcome all customary, conservative, and reactionary thoughts of the old times. Ultimately, this is the duty, mission, and rationale for the existence of New Women. New Women come before society with this ambition. You women who consider yourselves to be “pioneers” in the modern era, if you really want to contribute to the Korean nation and help develop a sound society for women, you should support this magazine so that these goals can be achieved.

61 Declaration of the establishment of Kûnhoe


Since the beginning of history, there have been all kinds of contradiction and antagonism in human societies. In each historical era, the constant fluctuation in human relationships has resulted in benefits to one group and impediments to others. The grass roots in our society are the underprivileged, and they have had to endure great suffering through most times. Women have always been placed in the positions of greatest disadvantage throughout history. Social contradictions have reached their peak in terms of scale and intensity. As a result, one cannot find even a trace of affection or loyalty among people, and the whole of humanity is pandemonium, fighting with each other out of material greed. The tragic outcomes of war are growing more brutal and far-reaching, and abject poverty and crime are rampant. If one sees a little bit of progress in the status of women in this era, it is nothing more than whimsical imagination. In Korea, the status of women is still very low. They suffer through remnants of the old era that still prevail. On top of that continuing degradation, they must now deal with the added agonies of the present.

It is readily apparent that all the irrational factors that put women at a disadvantage are essentially linked with factors that haunt Korean society and indeed all societies around the world. Therefore, all the solutions to the problems are intricately connected and cannot be separated from each other. The wretched among us must strain to gain a new life, and history guarantees the inevitable victory that will result from this struggle.

The true meaning of the women’s movement in Korea can be understood only after one grasps its broader historical and social background. Our role should never be seen in a narrow sense. Our struggle for our liberation should be done simultaneously to liberate Korean society and to further all humanity. However, we must not forget about local particulars in privileging the universal and the general. Therefore, in our attempt to develop a women’s movement in Korea, we have established a separate women’s organization, giving due consideration to all the particular conditions Korean women face. We realize that such an organization will enable us to guide Korean women more effectively.

The Korean women’s movement has taken an important step forward because of circumstances in Korean society and the world, as well as the
New Women in Colonial Korea
A sourcebook

Compiled and translated with an introduction by Hyaeweol Choi