

# Transforming Gender Relations through Intimacy

Lee Sook-in

Lee Sook-in (Yi, Suk-in) is Researcher at the Academy of East Asian Studies of Institute of Confucian Cultural Studies. She received her Ph.D. from Sungkyunkwan University in 1997. Her publications include “A Confucian Imagining of the Family” (*Hyeonsanggwa insik Phenomena and Cognition*, 2002) and “A Boundary between Changeability and Unchangeability: A Place ~~for the of~~ Female in Yin Yang Theory” (*Epoch and Philosophy*, 2001). E-mail: [confemi@yahoo.co.kr](mailto:confemi@yahoo.co.kr).

## Abstract

Understanding the Korean specific context of gender inequality and any search for a solution to these inequalities must be approached from a conceptualization of 'relationships'. The concept of relationships possesses a double function as a source to enable a Korean explanation for the experience of women's oppression, and also a means for us to feel out the possibilities for women's liberation. In this paper I undertake an analysis of the foundations of the knowledge that has constructed Korean gender relations from a historical perspective, and search for a revolutionary transformation of gender relations on this basis. As existing gender relations have been maintained on the mechanism of segregation and separation (bunli and hwadhap) and the (baeje and donghwa) which are greatly influenced by yedhiron (li-yun theory), I have paid attention to the feminine characteristics that construct these relationships. These aspects called the feminine characteristics in relationship construction do not rely upon factors external to the relationships, but rather according to the internal attributes of the which are in fact the source of a relationship's change and maintenance and have the power as intimacy to enable the creation of the self. In order for intimacy to operate as a positive new resource for a new gender relations, we must undertake an analytical critique of the cultural and historical contexts that make possible the existing means of relating and reinterpret these.

keyword : intimacy, relationships, gender, tradition, feminism, modernity

## What distorts our relationships?

The crux to understanding gender relations issues within Korean society lies in the conceptualization of relationships, as Korean people tend to understand the self and the Other within such a framework. In Korean culture the self is not regarded as an entity with a discrete essence that ensures and distinguishes the self from the Other. One can be described in various ways depending on whom one draws oneself in relation to, as an individual's existence is determined by the relationships that one has with others. Within this conceptualization, the significance of the differences between women and men is also very important. Who women are and what they must do, and who men are and their appropriate roles can also be explained within this framework that defines both other and the self. With this realization, we are able to delve for the characteristics specific to the experience of gender inequity in Korea and seek the beginning of a solution to these inequities from this understanding of the influence of patterns

and practices of relating to one another.

If the concept of relating and relationships is at the core of gender issues, its interpretation of can appear in various ways. Some feminists, believing that the history of female oppression and discrimination arises from relationship-centered thinking advocated women's liberation from relationships, or the dissolution of all relationships. This concept of "relationships" which these feminists refer to in their criticism, is one in which males are the active subjects and women the [other](#), and which requires the maintenance and expansion of patriarchy. There are also arguments, however, that human beings are unable to extract themselves from relationships, and that human beings find meaning from the sense of solidarity that they gain through relationships as they provide the true meaning of life. Despite these opposing views, it is clear that gender issues in Korean society must be approached through a conceptualization of relationships. For instance, if we follow the logic of feminists critical of relations and substitute "relationships" with "individuals," the potential revolutionary transformative capacity inherent in relationships is eliminated. This conceptualization of lived experience not only fails to explain the historical and cultural life patterns and the relationships traditions which became inherent within this, it also severs the access to various resources that have a complex meaning.

There is a problem in those assertions of male dominance which emphasize the sense of solidarity that is provided in relationships, failing to ask whose privileges and whose comfort are secured in existing relationship patterns. Accordingly, gender issues seen through the concept of relationships can be interpreted in two ways, as a means to criticize and negate the existing forms and definitions of relationships, or to create new relating practices. Approaching gender relations in Korean society through the framework of relationships provides us with a better position to critically examine Korean history, while enabling a more effective reflection on present problems and through this, a better view of the future.

When speaking of "relationships" as the central concept able to explain Korean tradition, contemporary problems experienced in gender relations, and project the future, the understanding and actual practice of 'relationships' as experienced in Korean society can differ greatly. The concept of 'relationships' should be understood as a construct and practice occupying a modern space in which pre-modern values conflict with modern values. Upon this realization, we need to question ways to construct a new concept and practice of 'relationships' that can embrace both pre-modern and modern concepts.

A new definition of relationships is required to accommodate this new concept of relating patterns. For example the use of the noun form of relationship to mean a "given" form denotes both vertical relationships, such as between parents and children, or superiors and subordinates, and horizontal relations such as between friends, partners, and colleagues. On the other hand,

when in the verb form meaning the act of “relating”, it is understood as a concept of the creativity of the self, one in which there is a dialogue between the self and other, and the self and the world. When relationships are seen as a creative concept of relating to the self and others, it enable a focus on the direction of the activity which is the movement between individuals themselves which is the principle tenet of the force which arises from the space of everyday life. Perhaps, the potential transformative power that can be found in relationships is the very creativity arising through intimacy. This is the power in a relationship which changes or is maintained according to the internal properties of the relationship itself, and is not dependent on external properties.

However, regardless of kind, relationships cannot originate from *mu* (nonbeing) as they are founded on the existing conditions (*soyeo*) of the given circumstances. "Existing conditions" here signify the social, environmental and historical influences embedded deep inside the individual. These include not only her social environment but also those influences accumulated throughout history. With these preconceived understandings, personal relationships start by distinguishing the helpful factors that promote the relationship from the ones hindering it and by questioning the environment or community of involved individuals. During this process, individuals confront both pre-modern and modern values that are mingled together to provide a basis for the problematic relationship between men and women in Korean society. This indicates that the discourse of gender relations is a mixed product of pre-modern and modern factors, as exemplified by the recent family inheritance distribution problems.

The storm of development that has swept across Korea since the 1960s has brought fatigue to the nation. The tradition of family land distribution, which stressed traditional 'gender roles' and ignored modern economic principles, was not immune to such socially transformative influences. It was confronted by a new situation in which the family assets required distribution to individual members. By what standards should property be distributed? Should the assets be divided equally among the family successors sharing common ancestry, regardless of gender or age? There was no tradition of such distribution of family assets. When family heads distributed property to the sons only, excluding daughters, they incited a “daughters' revolt.” Those who supported the 'revolt' argued that to divide the family assets according to gender, though all members shared common ancestry, was simply outdated and old-fashioned. The courts, however, dismissed the claim. According to Korean law, “The family clan is defined as a blood related group constituting only adult males. Therefore, females cannot be counted as members of the family clan and thus have no right to the family assets or inheritance.” In 1992, even the Supreme Court defined the family clan as "male family members who are 20 years or older."

Such legal definitions of the family clan, however, violate not only the principles of gender equality enshrined in the constitution but also the inheritance provisions stated in the civil law. However, the court decided to sustain the definition of a family clan since it is considered as a "traditional custom."

Actually, it is difficult to determine whether the "revolt" is due to a struggle for equality or simply a battle for ownership. However, they are closely related to each other as the notion that equality can be realized through the attainment of rights to ownership is a commonly held belief in Korean society. Much interest has been recently generated in the securing of an individual's rights to ownership, and it is not acceptable that gender play a role in the determination of those rights. The tensions arising between men and women have been unavoidable. It can be argued, then, that the problem of family asset distribution is created by the collision of two opposing values. The problem results from pre-modern values which validate males' sole right to 'given' estates, in conflict with modern values which advocate individual rights to ownership. This is a problem generated by the distribution of "ownership (*soyu*)" and "existing conditions(*soyeo*)." In order for men and women to establish an intimate relationship from a position of gender equality, Korean society must first resolve the discrepancies existing between its pre-modern and modern values.

Accordingly, this article will examine the meanings of the Korean usage of modern values, as it is these values which are used to expose the problems in the "relationship" between women and men. It will also discuss the limitations of these values in relation to Korean tradition, and critically investigate the structures and principles of traditional life which enabled the establishment of relationship formations based on androcentricism and the exclusion of women. Based on these findings, we will approach the creation of the self through relationships from the perspective of a feminist relationship structure. Finally, the article will discuss the ways in which feminism might coexist with tradition in contemporary Korean society.

### **Why are there no individuals? : A Defense of Tradition**

Armed with modern values, feminism has questioned our past: "Why were women not given their own names?," "Why were women robbed of their individual rights, even though they sacrificed themselves for their families?," "Why did women live merely as men's Other?," and "Why did traditional gender relations operate in this way?" Although these questions raised by feminists brought a great deal of confusion to members of Korean society, they were also fresh and thrilling. Feminism, as an imported ideology and practice, began an analysis of

the past and the present, and applied its findings to our present lives. Although feminism unavoidably clashed and conflicted with many Korean values, the changes which feminism has brought to women and their surroundings can not be underestimated. The traditional lives of women were no longer considered absolute or natural. Nonetheless, since certain parts of this reality continued to be retained as "common sense," there is a need to examine issues in Korean feminism and reality.

What is particularly notable in this process is the way in which feminists interpret the [traditions of Korea](#). Korean tradition has [simply](#) been rejected and considered a worthless legacy to be discarded. The process of adopting feminism in Korea was not one selectively undertaken in which aspects of tradition were recognized as problematic and other characteristics re-evaluated and considered for improvement. Rather a broad negative attitude was taken. Other possible interpretations and approaches to tradition were discouraged in a mechanical way, and as a consequence the chance to objectively perceive tradition was lost. However, despite this the Korean interpretations of feminism that argued for gender equality provided an opportunity for reflection on the question of one's identity

According to feminist theory, a person is an individual with own desires, striving to attain an independent and autonomous life. One's ego can grow infinitely but it is significant only when realized in one's name. Ultimately, one is an "independent subject" distinct from others, and equipped with authority as an individual to exercise individual rights. It is improper for one to sacrifice oneself for one's family, as they are unable to act as a substitute for one's life. As such, the Korean interpretation of feminism is focused on the self and the means by which the self and the world are constructed. In order to actualize this feminist self, it is inevitable that a woman separate herself from the existing community to which she belongs. This requires the separation of the self from traditional ways of life to enable the manifestation of a feminist self. Feminists are critical of tradition as there "exists no self" as an individual. However, given this logic, who is an individual within this traditional life context in collision with feminism? It is necessary to delve into tradition and examine how the female self was constructed and what it signified.

Within the traditional value system, a Korean woman did not possess her own specific name. Although granted a name when born, women were always referred to as someone's daughter, wife, or mother. When she asked herself who she was, she found her answer in the roles she played in these relationships. For her, "knowing herself" was undertaken as a struggle to better understand how to coexist with others, rather than a search for a factual basis of knowledge stemming from any inner doubts. To this self, only relative autonomy can be gained by positively supporting the viewpoints and demands of other people, rather than any absolute

autonomy irrespective of others. This female self might consider that "I do not ask of others what I do not want for myself"<sup>1</sup> and "I help others to enable them to achieve those things that I want."<sup>2</sup> Women's desires could be realized through recognition of other's opinions as well as their needs. In short, ethical subjecthood in traditional society could be established upon a rejection of an absolute and independent ego. Rather than a transcendental or thinking subject, this self was an **experiential subject** materially engaged in the endeavor to ensure her position within relationships and to live more harmoniously with others. Even the concept of good and evil was defined in this manner, as "evil" was not an abstract or destructive vice existing only in a person's mind, nor had it already existed from the beginning of time. Evil was any behavior that failed to establish or destroyed a relationship with others and thus unfilial behaviors and disloyal friendship were viewed as the worst evils.<sup>3</sup>

If the existence of "the self" is constructed as such in the traditional context, meaning is found in "the self" not through an attempted liberation from the community, but through participation and attachment to that community. Rather than the nurturing of the desires of any one individual, ethical meaning was invested in the care and tending given to others. It is ethical to this self to demonstrate favor and kindness to those with whom one has special relationships. To this self the world was neither constructed in one's interest nor did it revolve around the self. The act of learning was the realization that domain of the self was defined prior to one's choice and that others already occupied it. The traditional female self was burdened by the community and others, and found the meaning of her existence only through the roles and relationships she had with others. Women developed relationships with themselves through the relationships they had with others, having to adjust their desires and viewpoints through the viewpoints of others.

It was inevitable that past conceptualizations of the "self" and "self-realization" in traditional Korean society would collide with feminism and its advocacy of individual rights. A reexamination is required of the questions and problematic constructed by feminists in investigating tradition. Questions such as "Why was there no individual?" or "Why did the individual have no rights?" are not able to explain the Korean history of androcentricism and women's exclusion. In traditional Korean society, concepts such as 'individual' or 'individual rights' were foreign to men and yet their domination of women was rationalized. Feminists have criticized women in the traditional world for lacking self-regard as they subordinated themselves to their family and men. Tradition, as perceived by feminists, consists merely of gender discriminatory consciousness and actions within the broader framework of a patriarchal family system. Traditional society is described as filled with unfair rites and behaviors such as ritual ceremonies which imposed a heavy burden on women, the restriction of succession to sons only, resulting in a strong preference for sons over daughters, and tensions between

mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws. These issues are not dependent on whether or not concepts of the "individual" and "individual rights" existed, but are related to the application of relating patterns, or through the creation of relations based on a gender hierarchy and inequalities. Although issues may have been resolved through the raising of individual consciousness, the absence of a concept of an "individual" cannot be directly linked to gender inequality. In short, it is not possible to explain the phenomena of how men, who were also not perceived to have existence as individuals, dominated women from the center of that order.

We also need to reexamine the meaning of feminist self-realization within the context of Korean reality. The cultural self of Korean women, who cultivated their bodies and minds to provide meaning to that self in a male-dominated society, functions in a background vastly different to that of the feminism in operation in the west, and was not as simple as determined by feminism. The traditional lifestyles of Korean women – nameless, selfless, and without consideration of her individual rights with a singular focus on the well-being of her family – may not necessarily indicate women's oppression. Conformity to traditional lifestyles was demanded not only from women, but by all individuals regardless of gender.

Furthermore, there is a limit in the concept of individual rights, or of the autonomous and individual self, that was stressed in the Korean reception of feminism. The feminist self, which considers autonomy and independence a virtue only applies to a small group of educated women and was difficult to actualize in the masses. Is this merely because old habits and practices retained from the pre-modern days cannot be cast aside by women? What does the fact that the autonomy and independence enabling the actualization of rights is granted to very few women tell us? While this obviously indicates that society has failed to provide the majority of women with the ability to live as independent and autonomous individuals, it is also related to the view of humans founded on the concept of labor and the principal of the free market economy which sustain modern society.

The concept of labor, understood in terms of exchange value, defines women's domestic chores as "idle play," thereby alienating women from mainstream society. The principle of free competition, however, was based on conditions selected from male experiences. The so-called 'similar' conditions should have included not only forms and processes shared across gender differences, but also the conditions of women's lives that differ from those of men. The advocacy of autonomous individuality in society, within an institutional context without consideration of the material circumstances of the individual, merely implies women's incompetence and indolence. An "autonomous individuality," which does not consider women's actual experiences, most significantly in their roles as mother and caretakers of children only

enhances the alienation of women.

The fundamental issue is to determine whether the idea of the autonomous self or individual rights is an objective and universal concept that can explain human experience across all cultures. Whether the principles of a feminism constructed by western modern values can be objective and self-explanatory to Korean women is doubtful. If so, why should Korean feminists accept these definitions of the individual as the norm? It is imperative that we reexamine our circumstances with consideration of the concept of Orientalism which is the internalization by Asian people of western constructions of Asia as a concept of “imaginative geography.” This should arise from our questioning of how it is we define the relationships between the self and the Other. There is no need to abandon the search to define the self in relation to the Other or to find the meaning of the individual existence within community. [Instead, the established distorted relationship patterns should be critiqued rather than the objective individual.](#) Further discussion is also required concerning Korean feminist investigations of the distribution of resources and the use of relationships.

Feminism originates in the development of a problematic arising in recognition of both the devaluation and suppression of the demands and experiences of women due to the fact that all existing institutions and history belong to men. Though the origins of feminism are still controversial, the fact remains that men have viewed the world from a “self centered” perspective and have constructed theories and practices based on “self interest.” Feminists, who criticize men's self interest should at least be able to transcend self centered and self interested ways of thinking. As can be seen in the problems derived from male centered thinking, an understanding of the world that is focused on the self is not only the source of women’s oppression, but of all oppression and discrimination in human society. This logic warns both men and women to abandon egocentric thinking in order to end the history of oppression and create new patterns of human social interaction in which all humans, regardless of gender, are equal. Thus, there is a need to reward the assertions and ideologies of self being respectful of the existential experiences and social situations of the Other.

To attain this goal, it is necessary to once again examine the aspects that exist within Korean tradition that are problematic and seek those which can be newly interpreted. This is not to say that contemporary investigations should read tradition from a position that attempts to either defend or positively assess tradition. Rather, research should attempt to examine the problematic aspects of the demands made [by](#) women in traditional society, and uncover the mechanisms that enabled women to live peacefully within these settings through an acceptance of their discriminatory circumstances as an inevitable fact of their lives.

## The Gender Politics of Segregation and Harmony: Critiques of Tradition

Traditional gender relations evolved and were sustained on the foundation of two principles. The first was the construction of androcentric institutions and the exclusion of women through segregation. The second was a technique of ensuring the concealment of women's discrimination through the ideology of oneness, which asserted the identical nature of women and men. These combined systems enabled the institutionalization of discrimination and the ideology of oneness was a politics of segregation and harmony. I will first define the distinct characteristics ascribed to women and men through the principle of strict gender segregation and then examine the mechanisms operating to systematize these. In segregation of the sexes in Korean traditional society has its foundations in Confucian text *Liji* (The Book of Rites). In *Liji* it is stated that "Men and women should neither mingle or sit with each other,<sup>4</sup> nor endeavor to become acquainted without formal introduction,<sup>5</sup> nor exchange cups with one another except during rituals,<sup>6</sup> nor share clothes,<sup>7</sup> nor directly receive goods from each other."<sup>8</sup>

Cultural practices, including the customary practices stipulated above, were constructed on the absolute segregation of the sexes. This is illustrated by the instructions, "The meanings for the distinction between men and women is found in the actions of ceremonies such as weddings"<sup>9</sup>, "Men and women are raised differently. When a man reaches twenty years of age, he celebrates through his 'coming of age' his attainment of manhood and receives a penname and is called a son by his father, and a vassal before the king."<sup>10</sup> "[In mourning garb], A man leaves off headdress and his wife leaves off her belt. This is because men treasure their heads and women treasure their waists."<sup>11</sup> The biological differences which are categorized as male and female become the fundamental conditions which constitute social and cultural meanings, and developed concepts of gender hierarchy.<sup>12</sup> In short, the demarcations between men and women become the core of the discourse on social order.<sup>13</sup> As exemplified in *Liji*, discourse on gender in traditional society goes only so far as to stress the difference between men and women rather than provide a conceptual definition of the two. Gender could be seen as the most important variable in the development of social institutions in traditional society.

In the development of a system of propriety in traditional society based on this highly gendered foundation, the roles assigned to men and women each attained distinctive forms and values. Constructed in a complementary duality, men were seen as initiative and active, while women were considered passive and subordinate in supportive roles. "The Yin existence of women and their ability to give birth is important, but women must maintain their passive roles and be supportive of men. This is precisely the duty of the earth, the wife, and the vassal."<sup>14</sup> The role and existence of women as "supportive" and "passive" transcends the simple intention

of differentiating between women and men, and also works to secure male power through the social division of difference between the sexes. When supportive and passive roles are expanded to the extreme, women become defined by the *samjongjido* (“Three Followings”) as “obedient to their fathers as daughters, to their husbands after marriage, and to their sons in widowhood, women cannot accomplish anything by themselves.”<sup>15</sup> This was a system that became customary based on gender segregation.

In these conditions, what fostered women’s acceptance of this form of discrimination, and what mechanisms were in place to enable this? How can we explain the existence of women as the essential companion of men in a historical structure in which men are the sole leaders of all activities and representatives of all ‘human kind’?<sup>16</sup> How did society make use of women’s energy? Surely it must have been necessary to instill the notion in women that they are also, in fact, leading a voluntary and independent life. Only within this understanding could women have participated voluntarily in a male-centered social structure without question. Something was needed to make women to believe that their way of life was meaningful and that within the larger framework they could be active and the [subjects of their lives](#), even though in reality the role assumed by women was one of passivity and subservience. [The very idea was \*yeakiron\*, the theory of ritual and mechanism in operation.](#)

*Li* decides what is affection and estrangement, determines hatred and doubt, distinguishes between similarity and difference, and clarifies what is right and wrong.<sup>17</sup> *Yue* is for similarity and *li* is for difference. That they are similar brings them closer to each other and that they are different makes them respect each other. (The logic that everything is similar) incites confusion, (the logic that everything is different) incites division. Therefore, the need to employ these appropriately is the art of *liyue*.<sup>18</sup>

The *liyue* theory can be seen as a need of those in authority to eliminate potential causes of tension and conflict while maintaining a hierarchical social order. The logic follows that “*yue* (similarity) comes from the heart and *li* (difference) is formed externally... Animosity disappears if *yue* is present and quarrels disappear if *li* is present.”<sup>19</sup> We cannot ignore the pitfalls in the logic of *dong* (sameness), which states that “men and women are the same.” The concept of *dong* generally operates under the proposition that “Everything in creation is one.” Originated by pre-Qin Dynasty scholars, the theory became one that argued for “equality” or “uniformity”, depending on the proponent.<sup>20</sup> This reveals the political significance of “sameness”. Although the logic of *yi*, stating that “men and women are different,” carries the potential for a theory of gender equality based on the difference between women and men, it still raises problems as it was used for the institutionalization of male-dominance and female exclusion. Similarly the logic of *dong* must also be problematized. It argues that although the

ontological reality of women and men is hierarchical, “we” are equal in a higher dimension. In its role as the obscurer of the differences in reality, the theory of *dong* provides psychological consolation through the concealment of gender differences and was used to discredit discourses opposing real conditions.

These mechanisms that served to exclude women have inevitably distorted the idea of intimacy, which is a fundamental principle in relationships. The fundamental principle in the relationship between men and women used the ideas of *li* and *dong* and ended in advancing only the interests of men. Within this context, women’s consciousness and actual behavior were constructed as passive and supportive. However, regardless of the elaborate nature of this logic, the truth cannot easily be suppressed. Through feminism and its inherent modern values, the lives of women in traditional Korea have been reexamined.

The present situation confronting Korean women must be approached in two ways: through the questioning of the modern values that are used to critique tradition, while simultaneously analyzing the mechanisms that elaborately systematized womanhood in traditional society. Through this, we can begin the construction of new relationship paradigms. In the process, both the impossibility of absolutely “pure” relationships, and a consideration of both present values and those that have become historically and culturally inherent, must be kept in mind.

### **Feminine Characteristics in Forming Relationships**

The discussion thus far has been based on the premise that the concept of "relationships" in Korea raises gender issues, but can also be examined as a possibility for social transformation. It was also necessary to identify obstructive and supportive factors in the relationships between the sexes, Koreans were found to hold both premodern and modern values. In short, gender issues in Korea arise between premodern values which define relationship based on androcentrism, and modern values which focus on the individual. The recent family asset distribution problems are clear examples of the current social position of men and women. Consequently it is necessary to maintain distance from the ideology which denounces relationships themselves and also from the traditional relationship systems which worked to support male dominance. This is because Korean women's past and present cannot be explained if the relationships are denounced, and because the existing concepts have already been proven to be too fallible for future use without fundamental revisions.

Then how is it possible to raise consciousness on gender equality through "relationships?" By what means can women gain autonomy over their minds and actions without utilizing the

concept of "individual rights?" First, the feminine characteristics that establish relationships need to be examined from a new perspective. Then, external conditions of these characteristics should be considered, and women's autonomous will to form relationships with others within the context of "given conditions (*soyeo*)" identified.

What is the significance of relationships to women? For women, it is a survival method rather than a responsibility or duty. However, it is different from simply struggling for individual rights. A woman's purpose in establishing a relationship is not just for survival, but to form solidarity with others. For women, the significance of relationships is not external to the relationship but internal way to create, or explore, the self and the Other through the relationship with oneself, and between the self and the Other. It is a concept of the changing movement which is maintained and transformed by the inherent properties in the self and the Other rather than a means to attain status according to gender, age, or social background. We usually understand the father and son, or king and his subject in terms of relationships that bring to mind the practical virtues suitable of filial duty and loyalty. However, we merely stress the virtues required of sons or subjects without considering the mind or emotions of those from whom such virtues are demanded or the dynamic interpersonal relationships with the Other. Relationship in the true sense should concentrate on changes in the emotion, sense of intimacy, and affection of the parties involved. Otherwise, virtues of relationship, such as filial duty and loyalty, become a formality or abstract ideas and the one-sided obligation of those in the subordinate position. The reason we focus on relationships is because it helps us to attain a sense of continuity and solidarity with others. The relationship in this sense is notable in the feminine method of forming relationships between the self and the Other. However, there are risks to characterizing or specifying the way women establish relationships. In the idea of special characteristics is the presupposition that women were constructed this way historically and culturally, and not that way by nature. It also indicates that we need to include women's historical experiences in order to understand women today, and to define their nature and special character.

In this context, we can discern several special characteristics in the way women establish relationships. First, women form relationships from the periphery and to the center, rather than vice versa. For example, if a woman wants to become close to person A, then she first tries to establish a relationship with those who are close to A. Instead of using a direct approach to achieve her goal, she first creates a favorable environment.

I, as a wife, was able to earn my husband's trust because my parents-in-law adored me.

The reason why my parents-in-law adored me is because husband's siblings thought well

of me. It can then be said that my husband's siblings determine whether I am to be reproached or praised. So I must not lose their favor. People fail to win over their parents-in-law because they don't know this principle that they must win over their husbands' siblings.<sup>2 1</sup>

The relationship between two individuals does not involve just the two but also the network of people surrounding them. One needs to establish common bonds with people around the person one wants to win over. This method understands the self's existence within relationships with the Other and values the process of cultivating emotions and intimacy about others. Being sensitive to people's needs and satisfying those needs secure one's place and is at the same time action directed at the Other.

Another notable characteristic in the way women establish relationship is the simultaneousness and two-way communication created by face-to-face relationships in a specific living environment, rather than one-sidedly applying the 'given' ideology to reality. Consequently, women seem to think that the purpose of establishing a relationship is to change "obligatory relationship"(*uiri*) to "affectionate relationship(*gyogam*)."<sup>2 2</sup>

My husband's siblings and I are all of the same generation but since they are my husband's siblings, their status is higher and it is my duty to be close to them although they are distant. A wise and humble person can gain support by accepting the propriety as moral obligation to build up good feelings and love.... How can one gain an honorable reputation when emotion and duty are both amiss?<sup>2 3</sup>

It appears that women could not be persuaded with just an obligatory demand. Thus, they converted it to an intimate relationship through creating affection by transcending the dimension of duty and immersing themselves in relationships with the Other. Becoming close in a relationship bound by (legal) duty requires enormous effort. For example, it is said that "a man's wife and sisters are very close in terms of family relationships and thus they cannot help but be affectionate with one another."<sup>2 4</sup> On the other hand, it is also said that "those who are from the same origin have common sentiments from the beginning but other feelings may arise once a woman from a different family enters the picture."<sup>2 5</sup> From this, it seems that women have been recognized as a potential cause of family strife by the husband's family. Then, how was it possible for them to turn these into close relationships in such a situation? It is said that "scent of plantain leaves may be foul but once one digs them up and wraps them in one's skirt, one becomes accustomed to the scent that it feels familiar."<sup>2 6</sup> In other words, women use the

method of uniting minds or bodies rather than reasoning or rationality.

The idea of creating the self through relationships with others is also apparent in the concept of biological reproduction, if one considers human birth a result of the interaction between men and women rather than the creation by an external omnipotent power. According to the traditional way of reasoning, as described in *Zhouyi* (The Book of Changes), humans are born not because of an ultimate Creator but because of the consensus between father and mother. In this case, the gender relationship presupposes the equal acceptance of gender difference, not hierarchy or superiority. Thus, there may be some tension and hostility in the process but even these are only the conditions for a consensus based on difference.<sup>27</sup> The traditional understanding of gender roles contains the recognition that men make up forms and women make up the contents: “A father is compared to heaven and a mother is compared to the earth. Just as the earth produces all creations when the heaven sends down dew and rain, so a child is born through the parents' collaboration. The child resembles the father in body and the mother in temperament.”<sup>28</sup> According to such a description, rather than adhere to the dominating ideology, women already possess the resources of intimacy that place value on consensus, emotional exchange, and affection.

The feminine way of establishing a relationship centered on closeness with others was fostered by external factors such as the androcentric structure and exclusion of women, for example, determination of relatives, family names, and the family headship system. It was unlikely that traditional women could ever imagine a world outside such social categories. Even though today's women have more opportunities to create new relationships in other areas, they cannot be said to be free of the duties and obligations required by the traditional social structures. Of course, they could ignore all these categories and structures and establish relationships in an entirely new way.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the general characteristics of women can still be discussed within the context of the prevalent concept of social order.

A community based on androcentrism cannot guarantee for women the continuity of relationships or self-identity. The concept of family names following patrilineage or the determination of family relations based on the males separates women from their place of origin and throws them into situations where they have to create new relationships. Thus, it is difficult for women think of affections in unique or absolute terms. For example, in terms of the concept of filial duty, for men, it is easier for them to internalize this dominant ideology since for them it is based on blood relationship. For women, however, the concept of filial duty and friendship requires consideration of both her birth family and her husband's family. It is no wonder that women's activity is centered on situations and relationships rather than on rules and ideologies. In order for a woman to become a member of that community, it was necessary to treat those

with whom she had no blood relations as if she did. In other words, the morality of a woman depends on how good her relationships are with others, and that judgement depends on the praises and criticisms she receives from others. This feminine way of establishing relationships became internalized through history, bar any major changes in the system or ideology and became a “feminine” principle that worked in women. Women came to culturally learn that intimate relationships were established on the careful observation of, and consideration of others. Perhaps, the feminine characteristic of valuing intimacy in relationships resulted from such a context. But the problem is in the interpretation of such characteristics of women’s formation of relationships.

The general interpretation defines traditional women as passive beings or as victims of men. It is common to recognize women as victims and consider their lives as those called to assist in the preservation and development of the patriarchal system. However, we need a different perspective in order to convert these feminine characteristics in relating to strength. Women need to be seen as actively cultivating close relations and actively winning people over to her side. What is important is not the "facts" themselves but the interpretation of the facts and how to convert them into "strength." Rather than rejecting and abandoning tradition, we should discuss ways to utilize as a resource the survival methods fostered by the external conditions of the era.

### **From the Other to the Subject: A New Interpretation of Tradition**

The reason why tradition needs to be reconsidered is to discover the aspects that are still useful and which have been ignored by today's society. In other words, the utility of modernity must be viewed critically while searching for what has been overlooked from among [the traditions of Korea](#). In order to properly evaluate contemporary society, one must maintain a certain distance should be kept from it and that is where tradition is.

First of all, discourses of today's society should be reconsidered as they have been alienating tradition. There is more than a single truth to tradition which can be newly created depending on the perspectives and questions of the onlookers, its definition constantly changing. Tradition in the modern era was interpreted on modern values. Traditional women were created by the question of why there wasn't any independent or autonomous individual in traditional world. In this case, women become a passive being who lack self-consciousness, and whose life is devoted to servile sacrifice and service. When questioned differently, however, we will see a new aspect of tradition. Tradition could be approached by questioning the paradigm of relationship between the subject and the Other.

Tailoring the tradition to modernity can be considered an act of violence. It demands detailed differences for himself and yet defines others by what he "sees" or "wants to see." [Tradition, then, becomes a stranger to the present and traditional women become a stranger to feminists.](#)

Relationships that works as a catalyst to modern women and restores significance to traditional women are desirable. To discard or deny anything that goes against one's standard is to alienate oneself from others. The Other cannot be understood simply through the logics of knowledge. Only through senses and understanding that transcend logics of knowledge can others' lives be seen and appreciated, especially those from different historical backgrounds and social values. Instead of simplifying traditional women to servile beings buried in a social system, attempts to understand their existential dilemmas and redefine others' lives developed through conflicts and tensions are the actions towards understanding the Other.

Feminism of women, by women, and for women should join women in history. The subject and the Other are reciprocal beings constantly in process of constructing relationships. Completely separating the self from the others and becoming indifferent about each other makes the institution of "myself and the Other" meaningless. Then there is a relationship in which the self gets absorbed into the Other, or vice versa, called either "alienation of the self" or "internalization of the Other." Neither of these, however, are ideal relationship models. The relationship between feminism and tradition/traditional women should develop differently from the three models of relationship mentioned above. In order to redefine traditional women who had become "the Other" to the contemporary society, we must reevaluate the untold tradition through which existing text can be rewritten and new discourses generated. Traditional women's existential dilemmas which constituted their lives and consciousness within conflicts and tensions incited by socio-cultural text should be reflected upon.

In a traditional life, who 'I' am did not matter. Even without the modern concepts of autonomy, the existential self can be explained as gaining meaning through relationships. Then focus should be on the mechanisms of tradition which managed to explain the self not as an individual. External conditions of feminine characteristics adaptive at "establishing intimate relationships with people around" and strong recognition of the connection with the Other should be examined. Without their experiences and history, it is impossible to comprehend women's method of self-realization. Women lacking blood ties are sensitive to their environments and accustomed to winning people over to their side. Thus, it was pointed out that they are more prone to changes and adapt themselves to a given situation instead of adhering to their own principles or logic, grounded on cultural history. In spite of external conditions of relationship limiting the scope of alliance and solidarity, relationships are established to obtain unity. With whom and how relationships are established is a historical concept, but the desire to

identify "us" through relationship with the Other is a universal sentiment transcending time. Here we find the significance of looking into the method of establishing relationships through intimacy, tradition's legacy to women.

## Glossary

*mu* 無  
*soyeo* 所與  
*Liji* (Ch.) 禮記  
*Samjongjido* 三從之道  
*yeakiron* 禮樂理論  
*li* (Ch.) 禮  
*Yue* (Ch.) 樂  
*dong* 同  
*Zhouyi* (Ch.) 周易  
*uiri* 義理  
*gyogam* 交感

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- <sup>1</sup> 己所不欲，勿施於人。"Yanyuan" and "Weilinggong," in *Lunyu*.
- <sup>2</sup> 己欲立而立人，己欲達而達人 "Yongye," in *Lunyu*.
- <sup>3</sup> 元惡大咎，惟不孝不友。"Kanggao," in *Shujing*.
- <sup>4</sup> 男女不雜坐。"Qulishang," in *Liji*.
- <sup>5</sup> 男女非有行媒，不相知名。Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> 禮，非祭男女不交爵。"Fangji," in *Liji*.
- <sup>7</sup> 男女不通衣裳。"Neize," in *Liji*.
- <sup>8</sup> 男女授受不親。Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> 婚姻冠笄，所以別男女也。"Yueji," in *Liji*; 婚姻之禮，所以明男女之別。"Jingjie," in *Liji*.
- <sup>10</sup> 男女異長，男子二十，冠而字。父前子名，君前臣名。"Qulishang," in *Liji*.
- <sup>11</sup> 男子除乎首，婦人除乎帶。男子何爲除乎首也？婦人何爲除乎帶也？男子重首，婦人重帶。"Xianzhuan," in *Liji*.
- <sup>12</sup> 男女有別，男先於女，男帥女女從男。"Jiaotexing," in *Liji*.
- <sup>13</sup> 男女無辨則亂升。"Yueji," in *Liji*; 辨貴賤，長幼遠近男女外內，莫敢相踰越。"Zhongniyanju," in *Liji*.
- <sup>14</sup> 陰雖有美，含之以從王事，不敢成也。地道也，妻道也，臣道也。"Kungua·Wenyan," in *Zhouyi*.
- <sup>15</sup> 婦人伏于人也，是故無專制之義。有三從之道，在家從父，適人從夫，夫死從子。"Benmingjie," in *Dadailiji*.
- <sup>16</sup> An ideal man of virtue is a neutral concept without gender and yet, its general context excludes women. We can see there is an unconscious premise that a man of virtue and a male are identified as one and the same person. Lee Sook-in, "Gunja-wa pokgun" (Wise man and Tyrant), *Jeontong-gua hyeondae* (Tradition and Modernity) 21 (2002)..
- <sup>17</sup> 夫禮者，所以定親疎，決嫌疑，別同異，明是非也。"Quli," in *Liji*.
- <sup>18</sup> 樂者爲同，禮者爲異。同則相親，異則相敬。樂勝則流，禮勝則離。合情節貌者，禮樂之事也。"Yueji," in *Liji*.

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<sup>19</sup> *Jinsilu*

<sup>20</sup> For example, Huishi and Zhuangzi scholars assert that all creations are equal as they acknowledge each individual's unique characters. They strive for the organic order of equality which acknowledges natural and ontological distinction between the individuals. On the other hand, Xunzi and Fajia scholars tend to stress the uniform, or absolute, entirety grounded on the artificial order of distinction, the social status or political system controlled by propriety and law. Zhouguidian, *Gwangjwa jungguk cheolhak* (Chinese Philosophy Lecture), trans. Mun Jae-gon et al (Seoul: Ye Mun Seo Won, 1993), p. 376.

<sup>21</sup> 婦人之得意於夫主，由舅姑之愛己也。舅姑之愛己，由叔妹之譽己也。由此言之，我之臧否毀譽，一由叔妹。叔妹之心，不可失也。人皆莫知叔妹之不可失，而不能和之以求親，其蔽也哉。 “Heshimei,” in *Nujie*

<sup>22</sup> Here, we see the difference between “being intimate with close persons” (*chinchin*) and “respecting the persons in high position” (*jonjon*). The “intimacy” (*chin*) is the principle of love and the “respect” (*jon*) is the principle of order. In traditional society, the “intimacy” is understood as a feminine way, and “respect” as a masculine way of establishing a relationship.

<sup>23</sup> 夫叔妹者，體敵而分尊，恩疏而義親。若淑媛謙順之人，則能依義以篤好，崇恩以結援… 恩義既乖，何譽之臻。 Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> 若夫제사姑姉妹 親之至近者矣 宜無所不用其情. “Muqin,” in *Neixun*.

<sup>25</sup> 一源之出 本無異情 間以異姓 乃生乖別. Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> “Jieyi, Cairenzhiqi,” in *Lienzhuan*.

<sup>27</sup> Lee Sook-in, “Chai haeseok-ui yugyojeok teukseong” (Confucian Features of Difference Interpretations), *Yugyo sasang yeon-gu* (The Study of Confucianism) 12 (1999).

<sup>28</sup> 父天母地，天施地生。骨氣像父，性氣像母. “Fonglun,” in *Nfanjielu*.

<sup>29</sup> The basic purpose of the feminist movements, such as the abolition of an institution of the head of the family or the inheritance of both parents' surname, was to deconstruct the notion or boundary of the existing relationship. But these attempts are not just contemporary women's exclusive characteristics. “Fonglun,” the Confucian scripture, criticizes Daji, the queen to Zhouwang, the last king of the Shang dynasty. Since then, Daji was discussed as the example of shameless and disgraceful woman and functioned as an ideology to exclude women who do not abide by the system.