

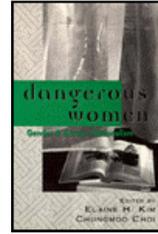
Danger Zone

Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism

edited by Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi

Routledge

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Review by Sharon Chur Lapensky (Fall 1998 issue)

The book *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, has reared the ugly head of two issues that have troubled me since my high school days. Why did Hawaii, Honolulu in particular, have an abundance of “Korean bars” complete with Korean bar maids? Why has there been a stereotypical view of Asian women as subservient, whose role in life is to dote on men? I hadn’t thought about these issues in quite some time, but while reading through this book I found myself analyzing them all over again.

Unfortunately the issues are complex and the answers are not simple. This book, however, helps the reader begin to understand how the popularity of Korean bar maids and the many stereotypical beliefs in general about Asian women is all part of the same issue, and how that mindset could have developed through history.

Dangerous Women provides a highly academic analysis of a kind of national psyche in Korea which places nationalism above gender issues and individualism, most particularly for women. The essays, written primarily by Korean American women professors at prominent U.S. colleges and universities, examine the development of Korean nationalism and the traditional view of gender roles. The title of the book implies that the recent emergence of women’s issues, and the higher profile and greater legitimacy now enjoyed by women leaders brave enough to speak out about these issues, is seen as a threat to the very core of Korean nationalism.

The essay collection begins with an offering by Chungmoo Choi entitled *Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea*, followed by Seungsook Moon’s *Begetting the Nation: The Androcentric Discourse of National History and Tradition in South Korea*. These two pieces provided an analysis of the development of the traditional roles of men and women in Korean society — men as primarily citizens who participate fully in society, and women primarily as “bearers of sons who will inherit the nation.” In other words, it argues that women are viewed as subordinate citizens whose primary role is to “produce for the community of men.” Elaine H. Kim’s essay, *Men’s Talk: A Korean American View of South Korean Constructions of Women, Gender, and Masculinity*, provides concrete examples of the societal view of gender roles. Kim’s work was based on interviews she conducted in Korea ten years ago. Her research explored men’s views of women and how their views differ depending on their own socio-economic standing. Kim also provided women’s accounts of their role as a wife and their tolerance of men’s attitudes towards women.

Three essays in the middle of the book explored the role of women who, either by force or through their own choosing, become sexual laborers or prostitutes. Hyunah Yang addressed the issue of Korean military “comfort women” in her essay *Remembering the Korean Military Comfort Women: Nationalism, Sexuality, and Silencing*. While the issue seems straightforward at first – Japanese forcing Korean women into sex slaves for the Japanese soldiers during the Japanese occupation of Korea – the issue is complicated by the fact that this victimization was known but largely ignored by South Korea for many years. Yang described how this silence has added to the pain and humiliation felt by the former “comfort women.”

Katherine H.S. Moon, in her essay *Prostitute Bodies and Gendered States*, explores the complexities of military prostitution and how the women who engage in this activity become entangled in the politics between nations, specifically South Korea and the United States. In an essay on a related topic, Hyun Sook Kim examined the portrayal of *yagongju*, or military prostitutes, in popular works and political texts of South Korea. In her essay *Yanggongju as an Allegory of the Nation: The Representation of Working-Class Women in Popular and Radical Texts*, Kim analyzes a novel and a short story and compares the portrayal of the women in those works with that found in texts produced by radical movement groups. Her analysis also includes an attempt by a former *yanggongju* woman to reconcile the contradiction that *yanggongju* have been portrayed as victims of foreign military troops when in fact they have also been victims of their own country’s soldiers.

The remaining four essays moved the topic toward a discussion of the changing view of Korean women in modern society. You-Me Park, in the essay *Working Women*, examines three different works that were published in 1989 in an effort to understand past political struggles of Korean working women and to define the current political status of women in Korea. In the essay *Ideals of Liberation: Korean Women in Manchuria*, Hyun Ok Park provided an analysis of Korean women’s struggle under a Communist philosophy. Park compares the political struggles of Communist women and Korean peasant women.

Hyun Yi Kang’s *Remembering Home* and Helen Lee’s *A Peculiar Sensation: A Personal Genealogy of Korean American Women’s Cinema* explored the experiences of Korean immigrant women who struggle to establish their identity as Korean American women. Kang examined four cultural productions by Korean immigrant women, which add yet another complex layer to the fabric of Korean women’s identity. The issues incorporated into these productions cover the issues of experiencing and bridging two divergent cultures as well as coming to terms with an “irretrievable Korean identity” as a Korean adoptee immigrant. Lee provides an overview of the body of work by Korean American women filmmakers by examining and discussing their representation of Korean immigrant women.

As a fourth-generation Korean American, it is difficult for me to even begin to grasp the thinking described by the authors of the earlier essays. On the face of it, the thought of living in a homogenous society holds an attraction for me. However, the notion of living

in a society in which the overwhelming majority subscribes to a common “nationalism” not fragmented by different cultural and ethnic groups, is a very foreign concept. Therefore, the content of those essays having to do with the role of “nationalism” is very difficult for me to grasp. I would recommend *Dangerous Women* primarily for a women’s study course on the college or post-graduate level, because it is difficult for the average reader to dissect the explanations and differing views of the political and social development of the treatment of women in Korean society as described here.

The final two essays begin to explore experiences that are closer to home for me and may be of some interest to parents of Korean adoptees. It was refreshing to find some critical analysis which specifically addresses the challenge of being caught between two cultures, specifically the dynamic of having both a Korean face and American upbringing.

I read through this collection with my “Korea-hound” perspective. Since my first visit to Korea in 1983 and the adoption of my two Korean-born children, I have been learning about my great-grandparents’ country and my own “Korean-ness.” This book provides an inkling of how life must be like as a woman in a country whose beginnings are based on a patriarchal society and whose history of oppression under colonial rule has slowed the social development of its women as independent individuals with human rights. Ultimately, as this book shows, these historical roots affect future generations in subtle ways, even the relocated generations, as they struggle to establish their identity and continue their advancement as women.