At the Cross-Section of Gender and Nation: Japanese Wives of the Unification Church in South Korea

In the later half of the twentieth century, amidst a highly complex international situation, South Korea witnessed a rapid construction of society, in almost all sectors, including economic, political, social and cultural. The post-war period also saw the development of several new religions attempting to address the social issues rising from this development. One movement that attempts to address the specifically new experience of multiculturalism is the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, more often known simply as the Unification Church. One of the means for doing this is its unique system of mass marriage, known as the Blessing Ceremony. Under the system, the church appoints spouses for its believers, in many cases coupling men and women from different countries. This marriage system accounts for a large number of Japanese expatriates in South Korea, most of whom are Japanese wives. Considering the strained cultural and historical relationship between Korea and Japan, the placement of Japanese women in a Korean family
under the offices of the Unification Church offers a unique reading of the cultural dynamics of Korea-Japan relations as well as of Korean patriarchy. In return, the internal support communities of Japanese wives serve as a significant position in the intercultural dynamics of these multicultural church-sponsored families, as these communities offer footholds for the internal evaluation of Korean patriarchal society.

In the post-war period, South Korea experienced a surge of immigration, especially from the neighboring Asian countries. Coinciding with the gender ratio imbalance of the baby boomer generation, a large number of women emigrated to South Korea in the hope of securing financial stability by marrying Korean men. This phenomenon marked a stark increase in what is now known as “multicultural families.” Among these female immigrants in Korea, Japanese women immigrants stand apart. This is because they have migrated not for financial security but rather because of their membership in the Unification Church. According to Chŏng-hee Yi, the Statistics Bureau of Korea estimates that among Japanese immigrant wives married to Korean men, 86.8 percent cited the Unification Church as their main reason for marriage (237). According to Gye-chŏng Kim, almost all interracial marriages between Koreans and Japanese through the Unification Church are between Japanese wives and Korean husbands (350). The disproportionate gender-ethnic coupling raises some interesting issues for discussion.

Mass interracial marriage, or what the Unification Church calls the “Blessing Marriage Ceremony” stands at the heart of Church doctrine. Adler, Scelfo and Philips state that its founder, Sŏn-myŏng Moon, “preaches that God’s plan for the world involves uniting the races in Christianity through interracial marriage” (55). In Pyŏnghwahungyung, a Unification Church publication, Gye-chŏng Kim quotes Reverend Moon stating that interracial marriages will be the key in overcoming bitter interracial conflicts. Under the Unification faith, race, region and religion will eventually unite in one family (347). Unification Church aims to overcome the historically and politically strained relationship between Korea and Japan through the Blessing Marriage Ceremony, by forming a larger family of humanity.

Moon’s ideal in uniting the world beyond racial, regional and religious conflicts initially sounds compelling, especially in an era marred by the clash between globalism and jihadism. However, there are a number of dangers that threaten the concept of interracial marriage
under the guidance of the Unification Church. These dangers lurk behind the façade of an idealized world of racial and religious equality: its coupling system, while propagating cultural and racial sensitivity, imposes Korean patriarchy on its female believers, extending its influence beyond racial boundaries.

Citing the 2009 statistics of interracial marriages between Koreans and Japanese, Gye-chŏng Kim claims that most Korean-husband-and-Japanese-wife couples reside in Korea (350). These wives enter Korea through the church, usually with little prior knowledge of Korea and few support networks. As most do not speak the language, or understand the specificities of the culture, Japanese wives must wade through the currents of Korean society in order to assimilate themselves. Their lack of relationships and social circles in Korean society emphasizes the role of their Korean husbands, as Chŏng-hee Yi claims that the husband must assume the role of their wives’ parents and friends (251). Living in a foreign landscape, the women often remain in the domestic sphere, which the husband heavily influences, if not completely dictates, her social interactions. Such dependency subjugates women in the domestic sphere.

Though such a domestic power hierarchy and dependency occur with other foreign wives as well, Japanese Unification Church wives demonstrate another dimension to the reinforcement of Korean patriarchy. Since the church propels and facilitates their marriages and immigration, Japanese wives remain active in their local Church branch. Chŏng-hee Yi claims that 81% of the entire Japanese wives population—whether married through Unification Church—participates in religious gatherings, while the average for all ethnicities was a mere 21.7% (239-240). As the church serves as the main domain of social interaction for the Japanese wives, its patriarchal attitude shapes the lives of these immigrant wives.

The Unification Church embodies a patriarchal attitude through its extensive assimilation training for Japanese wives. In the 33-day-long program outlined by Gye-chŏng Kim, at least half features cultural assimilation efforts. For instance, the wives are required to attend 64 fifty-minute Korean language classes, along with 6 classes on Korean tradition and a day-long course on Korean tradition and culture. This extensive attention to cultural assimilation and education contrasts markedly with the husband’s requirements. Unlike the extensive cultural education for the wife, the husband is expected to attend a single program on
“Japanese Cultural Experience” for just three days. Kim states that the program includes lectures on the cultural differences between Korea and Japan, opportunities for experiencing Japanese tradition and culture, bonding and conversing time with the spouse, visiting Japanese Unification Churches and sanctuaries, as well as sightseeing and shopping (353). The scanty nature of this orientation—particularly the mention of “sightseeing and shopping”—makes it seem more like a church-sponsored leisure trip, starkly opposed to the comprehensive assimilation course required by the wives. Moreover, the wives’ program includes four two-and-a-half-hour cooking classes but no professional training of any sort. The goal would appear to be to nudge the wives in the direction of the domestic sphere.

The contrast between the two programs asserts a gendered hierarchy between the two people. The Korean husband becomes the cultural and social authority, with the Japanese women endlessly attempting to learn and imitate her husband. As the cultural and social norm lies with the husband, the wife becomes apologetic, indebted to her husband for understanding her cultural ignorance and shortcomings. Through the disproportionate coupling system, the Unification Church and its members internalize a patriarchal system based on the ethnic and cultural differences between Korean husbands and Japanese wives.

The historically and politically strained relationship and the remnants of Japanese colonialism complicate the effect of Korean patriarchy on Japanese women. The subjugation of Japanese women into the system of Korean patriarchy attempts to overthrow the historical colonial oppression, serving as an opportunity for social payback. The ethnicization of patriarchy, then, reverses the colonial power hierarchy within an interracial family. As Unification Church grants authority over the Japanese wives to the Korean patriarchs, the husbands become domestic rulers. The husbands’ culture, to which the Japanese wives incessantly fall short, potentially become the family’s cultural norm. This process of Korean cultural focus marginalizes and negates the cultural assets of Japanese wives, as, regardless of their personal involvement in the historical conflict, their cultural heritage becomes a burden. The Japanese wives, in short, become the agents of repentance otherwise denied to the Koreans, as they live with a “repenting heart for the historical wrongdoings of Japan,” as one interviewee states (246). Likewise, they bear the weight of Japanese colonialism as individuals, devoid of voice in international relations, since their words have no choice but to
carry the weight of the wrongdoings of Japanese colonialism in the eyes of Korean society, rather than reflecting an individual point of view.

Under the church doctrinaire, the lack of Japanese female voices within the religion stretches beyond the boundaries of individual families. The church doctrine claims that the world will become one family (“Unificationism”). Such notion of cultural hegemony within a family, then, extends to include the entire church. The wives, as a collective group, must become the agents of repentance, while their Korean husbands, collectively, become the forgivers. The idea that the Japanese wives “owe” their husbands apologies, along with their feelings of indebtedness towards their husbands stemming from the help their spouses provide for them in a foreign land, envelop the group, in which they repress their individual opinions on both historical facts of Japanese colonialism, and issues of international politics.

An assessment of the cultural implications of the interracial mass marriage system of the Unification Church yields that the church’s goal of cultural unification failed to address gender conflicts. Though the Church was perhaps a natural baby boomer reaction to the post-Korean war culture, it failed to address culturally sensitive issues and instead fell into the clichéd discourse of patriarchic stratification, in which one culture subjugates another by exercising authority over women.

Despite the Church’s efforts, however, Japanese women have tended to cultivate the means to oppose such one-directional exertion. As active carriers of cultural heritage, Japanese wives hold the potential to influence Korean patriarchy in return. However extensive the efforts to suppress their native culture, the agents of cultural-crossing inevitably carry pieces of their original Japanese culture, since most of them spent significant amount of their developing years—if not all—in Japan.

As the most immediate reaction to their relocation, Japanese wives seek support among themselves. Although the patriarchal structure stems from the Church, the wives utilize their religious connection as a source of communal solidarity as well. Regardless of how strict or lax the church’s control on their small groups may be, Japanese wives can form individual connections among themselves, finding comfort among those who share a similar fate. Even though the group initially gathers to reinforce Church ideals, its members, through repeated
meetings, eventually share their individual Korean experiences. This repeated meeting and sharing allow them to form new relationships with the other Japanese women. For instance, the Japanese wives would have more liberty to discuss the social understanding—or the lack thereof—of the historical Korea-Japan relations in contemporary Korea. Since the community revolves around those from the same background, their discussions have the potential to reevaluate the complex international relationship from a unique point of view, as female members of historical colonizers residing under the patriarchy of the colonized. With their discussions, the wives may formulate more enduring perspectives on the contemporary perception of history, which they may use to influence their environment, through everyday relationships with their Korean friends and neighbors, as well as through their presence online.

Along with church-related community support groups, the Japanese Unification church wives develop their subculture within and between the Korean society and the church through their online and offline publications. Their offline publication, called *Bonhyangin* (본향인), features articles on both religious issues as well as lifestyle topics, such as floral arrangements and organic soap-making. The name of the publication echoes their cultural heritage, as it roughly means “hometown people.” Though the original intention of the name most likely refers to the Unification idea of a “true home” in God, the title inevitably draws parallel to a more secular notion of hometown, a place of birth. Choosing such a name for their internal publication reflects the dualist attitudes of the Japanese wives, seeking a new notion of hometown from the church, divorced from geographical location while, at the same time maintaining a secular understanding of their social, cultural and geographical home. The contents of the publication also maintain the wives’ cultural heritage, as it is not only written in Japanese, but also features articles on their lifestyles. Their online publications in private sections remain as members-only groups on dominant Korean portal websites, such as Naver and Daum. Similar to *Bonhyangin*, these groups seem to serve as online spaces for sharing their day-to-day accounts and experiences. Although these publications predominantly circulates within the group, probably since the church maintains its control over their publicity, these communications not only consolidate the Japanese wives’ evaluations and accounts of their experiences, but also have the potential to leave their marks on society.
The involvement of a particular religion in an ethnic immigration movement imposes a systematic structure to the Japanese wives of the Unification church. The Church’s attempt to subjugate the wives into the Korean patriarchal system may be criticized on the grounds of both cultural and gendered oppression. However, even under this system, individuals may come to offer a counter stance, especially through the work of group solidarity. This kind of analysis augurs well for the possibility of change in the system of Korean patriarchy, as well as in the strained political and cultural relationship between Korea and Japan.
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