

Chapter 4. Sexual Mores and the Idea of Chastity in Korea

Sexual mores and prostitution

For the most part, Korean society is Confucian and is said to have a strong sense of sexual mores and morality. It is certainly true that Confucianism upholds unshakeable gender roles for men and women. Korean society adheres to strict rules concerning sexual relationships between men and women as emblemized by the rule that boys and girls over the age of seven sit separately from one another. However, Koreans are especially strict concerning the chastity of women, and things that are instantly viewed as deviant when a woman does them might be considered normal for men. In a Confucian-based patriarchal society, it is thought that such attitudes towards sex also serve the important role of protecting the purity of the paternal line.

Back when the student protest movement was at its high point, there were a lot of cases in Korea of teachers being dismissed from their schools due to sex scandals. In general Koreans feel considerable apprehension about exposing their bodies, and a strong taboo against incest also exists with most people marrying outside their clan. Furthermore, Korean law also contains strict regulation of sex, such as the law against adultery, Article 241 of the Criminal Code, which mandates a prison sentence of up to two years to married individuals caught having an affair, as well as the person with whom he or she had the affair. Immediately after coming to power in a military coup, President Park Chung-hee cracked down on prostitution and acts of depravity. The South Korean government raided underground dance clubs, hauled any married women dancing there onto the backs of trucks, and then drove them through the city for all to see to serve as a warning to others.

On the other hand, Korean society has permitted men to keep a mistress, often on the grounds that men needed to produce additional offspring, and traditionally the *kisaeng* system played this role. The frequently lewd conversations of Korean men are perhaps also indicative of this situation. A society can never completely control its own sexual urges through a code of conduct alone and it is extremely common that even my fellow Korean university professors enjoy telling risqué stories over a meal. I was told of one school board president who boasted of being able to recite enough obscene stories to fill several hundred books. In contrast with Japan, which is relatively flexible and where sexual outlets do exist, Korea has fashioned a second culture below the surface of the Confucian society that treasures outward respectability. It's no surprise that Korean men, who have been permitted to be sexually libertine behind the scenes, have natural mixed feelings over the fading away of traditional morality in modern society. In this chapter, I will reflect on the reality that exists in Korea today which arose in modern society from this historical backdrop.

To sum up my conclusions so far, it was during the Korean War that, for a moment in time, the inhabitants of my village relaxed their traditionally strong Confucian sense of sexual morality and accepted prostitution in order to ward off rapes and sexual assaults by soldiers. After they had found a justification for permitting prostitution, they actively turned it into a

source of income. This was not a phenomenon limited to my own village. Rather, prostitution became normal around military bases and a sort of *de facto* licensed prostitution system developed. To some, prostitution ended up being not just an act of sexual depravity, but also a path to marriage. Especially in Korean society which puts a high value on chastity, women who had lost their virginity and had trouble getting married, including prostitutes, sought international marriages in Japan or the United States and often went abroad to ply their trade. In this context, one might say that there was a tendency for the line between prostitution and marriage to become blurred.

The roots of Korea's traditional concept of sexual chastity

South Korea's use of sex and chastity for political purposes is not a recent phenomenon, but rather it dates far back into history. Today the South Korean government has taken the traditional concept of sexual chastity and exploited it to advance its twin purposes of national consciousness at home and diplomacy abroad. The problem of the so-called "comfort women" is a good example. Here Koreans show strongly anti-Japanese attitudes and emotions while putting forward the notion that the chastity of all Korea was robbed by the Japanese, and that seems to be a reflection of the government's agenda. It would be fair to say that in Korea chastity is also an instrument of state policy.

However, it is not quite true that the Korean people's reverence of chastity means that they are in mental denial of their sexual side. Korean views on sex are conservative, but not quite puritanical. For instance, Korean women are expected to give their virginity to their marriage partner, and marriage is considered, like rites of passage, to be a basic requirement for life. From the Korean viewpoint, marriage is a fate that all people must accept, just like the Korean proverb says, "Even sandals come in pairs." For this reason, unmarried people are seen as a misfortune both for the individuals themselves and for society as a whole. Those who die unmarried are regarded with especial contempt and end up causing problems for both their families and their communities. In spite of this, Koreans still have a strong moral sense that a marriage ceremony must take place only once in each person's life. The Confucian code of conduct is that no second marriages are allowed, especially for women, even if the first marriage fails.

Under the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) the concept of sexual chastity was rigidly enforced throughout Korean society as part of the deeply-rooted Confucian outlook on womanhood. According to one saying, "Whether or not a woman starves means very little but whether or not a woman remains chaste means everything in the world." Women could not remarry after their first marriage, and sometimes women lived right alongside the graves of their husbands.

Confucianism promotes the principle of "three bonds," or "*samgang*" in Korean, which involves the bond between rulers and subjects, whereby subjects are expected to be loyal, father and child, whereby children are expected to be filial, and husband and wife, whereby wives are expected to be faithful. The idea of sexual chastity had a major impact on the spread of the "three bonds" concept, most notably on the Korean law of 1485 stipulating

that the descendants of a woman who remarried would not be permitted to take the civil service examination.

Even if her husband took a mistress, became deathly ill, or abandoned her, a wife would remain devoted to him and his family. She would stay faithful to him even if it meant suicide, murder, or mutilation of her own body. No matter whether her husband was kind or wicked, she would always stay true to him and uphold the iron rule of "*balsa ibu*," "never serve two husbands".

The Korean book, *Model Women*, contains a total of sixty-five anecdotes about twenty-four "virtuous women" and forty-one "heroic women". Seven of the stories about "heroic women" featured brides-to-be, in other words virgins who were not yet married in law, but who died in order to protect their chastity. There is only one about unmarried virgins who died solely to protect their chastity, the story about the two daughters of Mr. Bin of China, ages sixteen and nineteen, who committed suicide by jumping off a sheer cliff when it seemed like a bandit was about to rape them. These stories indicate that the "heroic women" were not defending their chastity for their own sake, but for the sake of their husband who they honored above all else under the doctrine of "*balsa ibu*".

The 1530 book, *Revised and Augmented Survey of the Geography of Korea*, discusses the origins of numerous stone monuments, including those dedicated to "heroic women" of the Goryeo Dynasty and Joseon Dynasty. There are a lot of instances of women who did things like slay tigers which had pounced on their husbands and thus saved their husbands' lives. The monuments emphasize the Korean idea that women must be strong in order to defend what is right and defend their chastity.

Also, in order to emphasize the principle that a woman must not remarry, the "young widow," who had been engaged and only briefly married, is used as a symbolic figure.

What became the traditional Korean model woman was a "heroic woman" who would protect her chastity like her own life even if something terrible had happened to her husband and she had to face great hardship. As examples of "heroic women," I will list out thirty-five examples of filial daughters taken from the Korean book, *The New and Expanded Illustrated Guide to the Three Bonds* (1434), which was a primer on women's education and instruction in use during the Joseon Dynasty.

(1) When a fire broke out at night, she did not flee to the temple, but instead in an act of faithfulness to her husband she allowed herself to be burned alive.

(2) Her husband married her mistress and left her, but even so she continued to be dutiful to her husband's parents.

(3) After her husband died, she drowned herself.

- (4) Even though her husband contracted a severe illness, she did not leave his side.
- (5) After becoming a widow she was tempted by the king himself, and so she cut off her own nose.
- (6) When the enemy was about to kill her husband or her husband's father, his wife put on a disguise and died in his place.
- (7) Though she had two sons of her own, she also raised the four sons of her partner's ex-wife as if they were her own children.
- (8) Even though her husband had not returned to her for seven years, she killed herself by slitting her own throat when her mother-in-law was about to be raped by enemy soldiers.
- (9) After the death of her husband, she was beaten to death without showing any unfaithfulness to him.
- (10) She broke her husband out of jail and then committed suicide.
- (11) After her husband had died, someone urged her to get remarried, but instead she cut her hair, cut off her own nose, and worked to support her husband's family.
- (12) After her husband had died, even her husband's father recommended that she get remarried, but instead she cut off her own ear and swore never to do so. She went to plant a tree in front of her husband's grave and when she saw the swallows flying past she was profoundly reminded of the late husband's love of her.
- (13) She and her husband encountered bandits while traveling and even though her husband escaped, she resisted being raped and was killed by them.
- (14) When her husband was banished to a remote island, her husband advised her to get remarried, but instead she cut off her own ear and swore not to. She read a biography of a "heroic woman" and stayed faithful. Ten years later her husband took a second wife, but he later abandoned the second wife and reunited with her.
- (15) After her husband passed away following a serious illness, she ran into a bandit. Just when she was about to get violated by him, she fought back and was killed.
- (16) After the death of her husband, her wrist was touched by another man, so she cut off her arm with an axe.
- (17) A bandit tried to rape a beautiful girl. He hauled her off with him, but on the way she hung herself.

(18) The Korean Army was shattered in battle and turned into bandits. They tried to rape a married woman who resisted and was killed. Her corpse was thrown into a river.

(19) Her husband was attacked by enemies and fled, and though she was almost raped by them, she resisted and then hung herself.

(20) After her husband perished without fleeing in an act of loyalty, his wife followed suit by hanging herself.

(21) A wife of a Chinese man of the Song Dynasty was about to be raped by enemy Mongols, so she claimed that she had to undergo a mourning ceremony and then killed herself by jumping off a precipice.

(22) When a married couple was captured by bandits, the wife told a lie to the bandits to get them to release her husband, then died fighting them so that she would not be raped.

(23) When war began her husband joined the army, so his wife found someone to look after their children and then hung herself.

(24) After her husband died in a far-off land, the wife continued to be obedient to her husband's parents and in order to find her husband's remains, she searched for them after praying on top of a sheet of ice for forty days.

(25) A wife who showed piety to her mother-in-law was kidnapped by bandits. When she fought back she was skinned alive.

(26) When her husband died of illness, she mourned for three years, then hung herself beside his grave.

(27) During an incursion by Japanese pirates, wet nurses including unwed women who feared that they would be raped hung themselves.

(28) A bandit killed her husband and tried to cannibalize him, so his wife allowed herself to be eaten in his place.

(29) Even though the man to whom she had decided to marry died when she was only sixteen years old, she stayed true to the principle of "never serve two husbands" and remained a virgin while living with his family for fifty-two years.

(30) When she was summoned by the king to become a lady-in-waiting, she ran off to the island to meet her husband, and then they both went to the Korean nation of Goguryeo where they became the king's retainers together.

(31) A women with four children refused to be violated by invading Japanese pirates and was killed by them.

(32) During the late-sixteenth century Japanese invasion of Korea, when a woman whose husband had gone to war was about to be raped she left behind her infant children and killed herself by tossing herself into a river.

(33) A women who was just about to be raped by Japanese invaders resisted her attacker because she was already married, so her arms and legs were chopped off, killing her.

(34) When her husband was bitten by a tiger, she rescued him.

(35) A woman grieving the loss of her husband died after fasting for fifty-three days and was then buried together with him.

Of these thirty-five stories, five are about women from the period of China's Han Dynasty, nine are from China's Song Dynasty, five are from China's Yuan Dynasty, two are from China's Tang Dynasty, three are from Korea's Joseon Dynasty, two are from Korea's Goryeo Dynasty, and there is also one story each from the Korean state of Baekje, the Chinese state of Cai, the Chinese state of Wei, China's Five Dynasties Period, and China's Qi, Liang, Sui, Jin, and Ming Dynasties.

By comparing the ratio of stories set in China to stories set in Korea, we can see that twenty-nine of the thirty-five are Chinese and only six are Korean. The role models for Koreans were Chinese, especially of the Song Dynasty. This was natural for the leaders of the Joseon Dynasty who venerated the teachings of the Song Confucianist scholar Zhu Xi.

In addition, four of the stories deal with women who resisted Japanese men.

The concept of sexual chastity in Korea

As I already noted, denial of sex per se is not part of the Korean mentality. Koreans are not sexually repressed but rather one might say that they put their focus on specific human relationships. I believe that the most quintessential examples of this are the concept of chastity in Korean society and the prohibition on remarriage. A common dictionary definition of chastity might be, "The maintenance of purity in sexual relationships between women and men, especially the faithfulness of a woman towards a man." This definition includes no restrictions on things like masturbation or nocturnal emissions, in other words, it lacks references to "celibacy towards oneself". I would argue that it is a very Asian notion.

Confucius' *Analects* do not directly deal with sex in relationships between men and women, but it does mention that one of the "three things the gentleman should guard against" is "the attraction of feminine beauty". This has a strong implication of celibacy, but not as an

institutional rule, and yet, as a result of a long historical process, these ideas would take root as a societal institution without advocating celibacy.

This code of sexual conduct was institutionalized through the work of Zhu Xi at the time of China's Song Dynasty (960-1279), which had a special influence on East Asia. This is why Korea's sexual mores are said to be Confucian. Basically, it can be thought of as the management of women's sexual behavior through the establishment of a societal code of sexual conduct. In other words, Confucian sexual ethics are controlled through societal relations.

Such Confucian sexual ethics stand in contrast with Christian ideas. In Christianity, the New Testament encourages celibacy without marriage when it is possible. If we acknowledge that chastity can be defined in both subjective and objective ways, then we could say that for Christians chastity signifies "chastity of mind" first and foremost. In his essay, "The Battle for Chastity," Michel Foucault placed great significance on the "subjectivation" of chastity while discussing the theories of John Cassian. Foucault described how monks especially suppress their lustful impulses on both a conscious and subconscious level. For instance, they grapple with how to manage both conscious acts of masturbation and subconscious acts of nocturnal emission. For them the hardest things to deal with are sexual impulses that occur in dreams and while sleeping. Tolstoy concurred that, "The hardest fight to win is the fight against lust."

Chastity and its discontents are also a major issue for world religions. Religion's role in reinforcing institutions is to portray sexual pleasure as being dangerous and repress it. The ancient form of ascetic morality, which warns against wine and women as being a path to self-destruction, exists in society primarily due to the religions which advocate fidelity to one's husband and the suppression of lust.

The Korean concept of sexual chastity is different from Western-style celibacy. The Korean way of thinking is strongly patriarchal, derived from an ages-old system of chauvinistic sexual discrimination which even today has far from faded away. The traditional code of sexual conduct values only the chastity of women and the prohibition on their remarrying, but it gives men free reign.

In spite of this, the status of women's rights in Korea has improved as a result of the postwar prohibition on keeping a mistress. Today, Korean men are relatively restrained when it comes to adultery and prostitution and have paradoxically ended up adopting the same sexual morality devised for a patriarchal society. Furthermore, it seems that Western-style celibacy has also infiltrated Korea to some degree due to the spread of Christianity.

Even so, nothing has been able to change the fundamental Confucian principles. There is even a trend among Korean women who have lost their virginity, such as prostitutes, to break free of the shackles of Confucianism by fleeing to Japan and the United States. Naturally though, this cannot be explained solely through reference to the Korean concept

of chastity, and there are probably also economic motivations behind the trend, alongside the widespread mental idea that you can start anew by moving to a place where no one knows your name.

Identity through sexual chastity

Due to the influence of Enlightenment ideas and Christianity, the Joseon concept of sexual chastity has been acknowledged as an old feudal relic that should be reformed. Divorce and remarriage are legally possible in Korea today.

Nevertheless, the traditional concept of sexual chastity remains firmly implanted. Adultery is still prohibited by law. According to Article 241 of the Criminal Code, "If a married person commits adultery, his or her partner may press charges to have both sides sentenced to up to two years in prison," and though crimes concerning chastity dealt with in Chapter 312 of the Criminal Code mainly cover rape, there is also Article 304 which states, "Any man who has sex with a woman who has no history of lewd conduct, either by claiming he would marry the woman or else through other fraudulent means, will be sentenced to up to two years in prison."

The traditional concept of sexual chastity is strongly rooted not only in law, but in custom as well. Korean society remains generally Confucian, and so has a strong sense of sexual mores and morality. Indeed, Confucianism maintains strong gender roles in order to avoid sexual relationships between men and women, including the rule that boys and girls over the age of seven sit separately from one another. Confucianism is especially strict concerning the chastity of women. In traditional textbooks used for women's education, like *Model Women* and *Instructions for Women*, it was stressed that women who were deprived of their chastity would have no choice but to kill themselves. Naturally, any extramarital sex for women was seen as a horrendous act. By contrast, things that are instantly viewed as deviant when a woman does them might be considered normal for men. In a Confucian-based patriarchal society, it is thought that such attitudes towards sex also served the important role of protecting the purity of the paternal line.

Confucianism originated in China, and the Confucian code of ethics can still be seen among Chinese citizens of Korean descent. In August of 1983, the Chinese government issued the "Provisions for the Registration of Marriage between Chinese Citizens and Foreigners" and set up the Department of Marriage to administer it. China did this because of the large number of international marriages that have been taking place recently between Chinese women of Korean descent and South Korean men. Generally the men are remarrying and the age difference between them and the women is great. This has caused social problems such as bought brides, sham marriages, and an unbalanced sex ratio in rural villages. In April of 1993 the "Memorandum of the Prefectural Government Concerning Bride Buying by Foreigners" was issued and administered, but prostitution and related activities have remained prevalent.

Changes in attitudes towards sex and chastity can also be seen in South Korea. A movement gradually arose in South Korea among those who viewed Westernization and foreign culture as being sexually decadent to guard against this sexual immorality in modern society by reinforcing the traditional concept of sexual chastity as it existed in books like *Instructions for Women*. In the 1980's sales of the book *Instructions for Women* suddenly skyrocketed as a result of the production of the TV drama, "Plum Blossom in the Snow", which includes the book's author Lady Han as one of its protagonists. The image of the "heroic woman," as an ideology of male chauvinism rather than celibacy, became the symbol of the movement to reinvigorate traditional sexual morality amidst the sexual liberation and decadence that had accompanied modernization.

The nationalism of sexual chastity

Korean historical records often document the rape of chaste Korean women by enemy forces. In particular there are many records relating to rapes by Mongolians, Chinese, and Japanese.

In the thirteenth century, the Mongols invaded the Korean Kingdom of Goryeo on seven occasions. As one of their peace terms, the Mongols demanded women as tribute. The Mongols did this in order to provide marriage partners to the soldiers who had surrendered to them during the invasion of China, and also to sap Goryeo's will to resist by robbing its women of their chastity.

Following its capitulation to the Mongols, Goryeo set up the "marriage bureaucracy" in order to recruit virgins between the ages of twelve and sixteen and send them to the Mongols. Records indicate that Korean messengers bearing virgins as tribute made their way to the Mongol court more than fifty times over a period of eighty years. Virgins were prized due to the moral principles that premarital sex was wrong and that the paternal bloodline should not be contaminated.

The Ming Dynasty, which governed China after the fall of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty, also exacted a tribute in virgins from the Korean peninsula for the purpose of "strategic marriages." Through this period, suicides and early marriages of young Korean women were common to escape being sent away as tribute and hatred of the Mongols was especially strong.

By the middle of the Joseon Dynasty, which succeeded the Goryeo Dynasty, the deification of chastity was becoming widespread. One entry recorded in the book *Treatise on the Board of Punishments* states, "In 1379, Mr. Park died and his wife was sexually threatened by the grandson of Mr. Park's cousin. Mr. Park's wife refused his advances and was killed by him. When we prayed to her spirit during a year of drought it rained, and so we called it 'the rainfall bestowed by the faithful wife'." In *Collected Edicts*, a legal distinction is made between virgins who were from aristocratic families and commoner women, married or unmarried ordinary women who were not prostitutes. The rape of a virgin was to be punished by beheading, whereas the rape of a commoner woman was to be dealt with

through normal law. In the year 1682, one man was beheaded on the spot for raping a virgin by the side of the road.

In addition, gender roles became stricter. Special etiquette for behavior both inside and outside the home was established, including the rule that a lady must never speak a word, even if she is with her sisters, as she enters the room where her husband is, and the rule that a lady must never socialize with anyone other than her father and mother, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, and father-in-law and mother-in-law.

The recent trend in Korea has been to look up to China and look down on Japan. When Koreans show hostility towards Japan today they sometimes still mention the Japanese pirates, Japanese bandits, and Japanese invasions referenced in days of old.

The Korean encyclopedia *Topical Discourses* mentions 356 "heroic women" of every social class who died defending their own chastity during Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea, far more than its 67 filial children and 11 loyal subjects. Among them is the story of Nongae (?-1593), a *kisaeng* who lured a Japanese general to the riverbank and then, while embracing him, hurled him and herself into the river. This story was passed on orally before being recorded, and today there is a festival in the city of Jinju in worship of Nongae.

Among the thirty-five filial daughters discussed in the aforementioned book, *The New and Expanded Illustrated Guide to the Three Bonds*, there are four dealing with Japanese enemies. "During an incursion by Japanese pirates, wet nurses including unwed women who feared that they would be raped hung themselves." "A woman with four children refused to be violated by invading Japanese pirates and was killed by them." "During the late-sixteenth century Japanese invasion of Korea, when a woman, whose husband had gone to war, was about to be raped, she left behind her infant children and killed herself by tossing herself into a river." "A woman who was just about to be raped by a Japanese bandit resisted her attacker because she was already married, so her arms and legs were chopped off, killing her."

Even during the late Joseon Dynasty, references to sexual atrocities by Japanese pirates continued to crop up. There are fifty stories in the "Chastity" volume of *Biographies of Wise Women*, including seven involving the Japanese. One of them says, "During the Goryeo Dynasty, a virgin in Ryeongsan, South Gyeongsang Province, who was twenty years in age, fought back against Japanese pirates attempting to rape her and was killed." The book notes that, "There are an especially large number of heroic woman from the times of the Japanese and Manchu invasions. Korea had become a nation of heroic women."

Photo Caption: Nongae Shrine, a popular tourist destination in South Korea.

Xenophobic fears of the Japanese people, based on Korea's history of wartime sexual violence, have been further stoked by nationalist sentiment in Korea. Sexual fears of the Japanese people are a recurrent theme in Korea history, and up to this day they continue to

reappear time and time again. This is what the problem of the so-called "comfort women," as well as the criticism of "*kisaeng* tourism," are all about.

In the 1970's, the government of President Park Chung-hee promoted "*kisaeng* tourism" as part of its economic development strategy. Because so many Japanese men in particular took advantage of it, Japanese people were called "sex animals" in South Korea. Consequently, anti-Japanese sentiment rose and at times it even became an impediment to good Japan-Korea relations. It became a social problem too, and during this time there was one case of a Korean *kisaeng* who jumped to her death after leaving a suicide note that read, "The Japanese men crush their lit cigarettes butts all over my body, and I just can't bear it anymore." Women's rights organizations began an investigation into the incident, and it made headlines not only in South Korea, but across the world. It even became the subject of a play.

Thus, Koreans are intensely fearful of sexual violence by Japanese people, but American soldiers are a very different situation and it does not appear that Koreans bear any great ill will towards them. In the case of the US Army, it seems that their feelings are tempered by the role America played in protecting the peace and security of the Korean Peninsula.

South Koreans had decided that Japanese culture was sexually depraved, and so imports of Japanese popular culture have been strictly prohibited. Sex culture is not widely accepted in Korea, as it is in Japan, and yet there are still all manner of social problems in Korea relating to sex including illegitimate children, *kisaeng*, prostitution, adultery, mistresses, sexual discrimination, and abortion. Most of these things are connected to the issue of sexism.

If you look at Japan's sex culture from the perspective of Korea it does appear rather sleazy. However, in other areas like the structure of the family household, Korean and Japanese society are very similar. In comparing Korea and Japan, differences and similarities exist side-by-side, and this is a major reason why we misunderstand each other so easily.