

Women and Democratization Movements:

A Comparative Perspective

by George Katsiaficas*

When Kathleen Cleaver, the first woman on the Central Committee of the Black Panther Party, was asked by a reporter about the role of women in the organization, she snapped back: “No one ever asks me what the role of men in the revolution is!!” Her protest was well taken. Very often in truly revolutionary organizations, men and women establish respectful relationships based upon equality and play roles very similar to each other. In the Black Panther Party in 1969, two-thirds of the members were women, and although it suffered murderous police attacks in which dozens of its members were killed, the organization led the way in openly supporting women’s (and gay) liberation.¹

The problem, of course, is that patriarchy permeates society, deforming even the most revolutionary of movements. Whether we live in America or Korea, in Europe, Asia or Africa, women are systematically subordinated, discriminated against, compelled to work double shifts as mothers/housekeepers and employees, reduced to objects of sexual desire, and subjected to violence by men. A recent study found that Korean wives work an average of 72.4 hours per week at home—against only 9.2 hours per week for husbands.² In addition to this disparity, many Korean women work outside the home (accounting for some 40% of the workforce) but 95% of them in 1998 were “concentrated in lower echelons of occupational hierarchy such as clerical, sales, services, agricultural and manual labor.” In 1997, Korean women’s earnings were only

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¹ For more on the Panthers, see *Liberation, Imagination and the Black Panther Party* (New York: Routledge, 2001) edited by Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas.

² Cited in *Asian Women*, Spring 1997, Vol. 4, p. 240.

58% of their male counterparts.³ These statistics only begin to give us a picture of patriarchy's pervasive power in shaping daily life.

Patriarchy predates capitalism and is so embedded in our consciousness and unconsciousness that overthrowing it would result in the most radical of all presently conceivable revolutions. By radically transforming everyday life, a feminist revolution (one that did not coexist with other forms of oppression) could necessarily be the most democratic of all revolutions—insuring that all people would be free in their daily lives to determine their own destinies. As is intuitively obvious, women would benefit from a feminist revolution, but as studies have increasingly shown, so would men. As is well known, women on the average live many years longer than men. If men were granted the space to raise children and care for the elderly, to spend more time in their families and circles of intimacy and less in the stressful environment of the workplace or other arenas of power and wealth, their life expectancies—to say nothing of the quality of their lives—would noticeably increase. Many women already have democratic patterns in their daily lives. Although not a feminist, Deborah Tannen, a sociolinguist, came to the conclusion that in their everyday conversation patterns, U.S. women tended to establish intimacy along horizontal lines while men tended to establish hierarchy.⁴

Role of Women in Democratization Movements in the US and Europe

Part of the problem involved in discussing the relationship of women to democratization movements is that women are often the main constituency of these movements.

³ See Kim Mun-cho, "Informatization and the Transformation of Women's Social Status in Korea," *Asian Women*, December 1998, Vol. 7, p. 141.

⁴ See her insightful book, *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation*.

Simultaneously, however, because of the context of patriarchal domination, they are often relegated to subordinate positions within those movements. In the early 1960s in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—one of the main organizations of the US civil rights movement—women complained that they were the ones who typed the memos while men wrote them and mimeographed the press releases while men spoke to the cameras. Not only were women made to work behind the scenes but they were also explicitly denigrated as activists. In an unfortunate remark, Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) once publicly stated that the “the only place for women in the revolution was on their backs.” In both Germany and the United States, male leaders of the main student organizations of the 1960s New Left in each country initially regarded demands for women’s liberation with great hostility. In all fairness, I must add that by the end of the 1960s, feminism had become an integral part of every major organization of the movement in the US and soon thereafter in Germany as well.

Feminism’s broad impact on democratization movements in the U.S., Italy and Germany was due in large part to women’s development of their own autonomous organizations as a power base for theory and practice. Independent women’s organizations deepened the overall movement’s commitment to revolutionary change. In Italy, the autonomous feminist movement set an example of a “politics of the first person” in which individuals did not take orders from higher-ups and where groups operated according to principles of self-managed consensus. Feminism’s notion of autonomy was vital to the subsequent emergence of autonomous youth and workers’ movements.⁵ In South Africa, women within the African National Congress, committed

⁵ See my book, *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements*

to insuring women's participation in all decision-making bodies, made the democratization movement more effective and sensitive to women's concerns and leadership.

Asian Democratization Movements and Women

In Asia a new generation of women leaders has emerged to lead democratic governments and political parties. I am thinking here of Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, Gloria Arroyo in the Philippines, and Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan. To be sure, female leaders are not confined to democratic tendencies. One need only recall examples like Megawati Sukarnoputri, Indira Gandhi and Park Geun-hae to realize that women can be just as hierarchical—even dictatorial—as men. In digesting the meaning of the above list of women leaders in contemporary Asia, however, one cannot help but note that every single one of these women came from a father who was head of the government—i.e. a patriarchal legacy makes their leadership possible.

Turning to grassroots democratic movements like the Gwangju Uprising, women were central to the life of the liberated city and what has been called the Absolute Community. In December 1978, they organized Song Bak Hue () to care for political prisoners and their families. Once the uprising broke out, women were the main force organizing the daily rallies at Democracy Square; they were the key people involved in publishing big character posters; and they were instrumental in the publication and distribution of the daily newspaper *The Fighter's Bulletin* (). A handful of

and the Decolonization of Everyday Life (Korean translation published in 2000).

women carried carbines, and some were responsible for gathering bottles and fuel to make Molotov cocktails. In a few cases, they even threw them.⁶ On May 21, after the military opened fire on the huge demonstration on Gumnam Avenue, people armed themselves and fiercely fought back—driving the military out of the city after 8 hours of intense combat. A notable part of the people’s offensive were seven busloads of women textile workers who drove to Naju, captured hundreds of rifles and ammunition, and brought them back to Gwangju.

Despite the heroic participation of women in all facets of the uprising, it appears that they were too often subservient to men and confined to “normal” roles and modes of behavior.⁷ With the notable exception of Chun Ok-ju, for example, it was almost always men who rode in the commandeered vehicles of the Citizens’ Army. Women were mainly involved in traditionally defined female roles: making Kimbab and serving food in public kitchens, managing the donations of blood and money, and caring for the wounded and dead. As an indication of the extent to which the Gwangju community came together, even prostitutes insisted on making blood donations. When a doctor tried to stop them, one replied: “Our lives are dirty but our blood pure.” She felt “revived” since formerly she was regarded as “low and dirty.”⁸ The remarkable solidarity of liberated Gwangju was a brief taste of a genuinely free society, yet within that communal liberation, women’s roles were not dramatically transformed.

When it came to formal leadership positions, women were often excluded. The

⁶ Interviews with Oh Kyong- min, Jung Hyang- ja and Lee Chun- hee, and Chong Hyun- ay were essential to my understanding of these dimensions of the uprising.

⁷ Discussions with Dr. Kang Hyun- ah were very helpful in understanding this issue.

⁸ Anonymous interview, November 7, 2001.

reorganization of the Citizens' Army (), the main force of the resistance, on May 25th did not include one woman among the leadership positions—despite as many as one-third of the activists involved in street-actions being females. On the night of May 26th, when it was apparent that the military had organized overwhelming forces and was poised to reenter the city, women and young fighters were ordered to leave Province Hall by the male leadership (including Yoon Sang-won). More than a few women disobeyed this order and remained inside Province Hall for the final battle, but nearly all women obeyed the order to leave.⁹ Several reasons existed for women being asked to leave, the most practical of which was that nearly all men had military training from which they had learned how to use weapons—skills few women had the chance to learn. Although a few women did carry guns during the halcyon days of liberated Gwangju, they were the exception: generally men carried the guns and women's participation was limited to non-combatant roles—a mirror of the patriarchal division of labor that Korean militarism imposes on the society at large.

While examples of women leaders and fighters in Korean history (as written almost exclusively by men) do not abound, we can find some that are known to almost every Korean. The drinking woman Non Gae, for example, sacrificed her own life to strike a blow against Japanese invaders in the 16th century. Blessed with considerable beauty and a talented dancer, she waited for her chance to strike against the Japanese when they reached Jinju in Gyeongsangnam-do. Cleverly seducing one of the leading Japanese generals, she wrapped her arms around him and flung their bodies into the river from

⁹ In an interview on 10/28/01, Chong Hyun-ay reported that she met 10 women from Province Hall in the prison at Sangmudae after the 27th.

high up on rocky cliffs, killing them both. On March 1, 1919, Yu Kwan-sun, a leader of one of the pro-independence groups in Seoul, joined in the nationwide protests against Japanese colonialism. During the demonstrations on that day, the participation of women students was striking. Afterwards she returned to her hometown, Chiryong in South Chuongchong province, where on April 2, she handed out Korean flags and publicly called for Korean independence. Arrested and tortured to death by Japanese police, her body was never found. Four decades later, many women were among the thousands of heroic partisans of southern Korea, nearly all of whom were killed while resisting the US-led imposition of the post-World War 2 division of the country before the Korean War.

In the 20th century, as Korea industrialized, women were a majority of the factory workers. In the 1930s, they comprised 61% of factory workers.¹⁰ By 1970, industrial worksites with more than 10 employees counted 360,000 women workers among their members, a number that grew to 1,090,000 by 1978. These women were concentrated in textile, fiber, clothing and electronics industries, often in free trade zones where unions were illegal and the daily wage was only 500 won (at the time 1 dollar was 480 won). Men were paid double that amount. In the area around Pyong Hwa (Peace) market, girls aged 12 to 17 labored 16 hours per day—often seven days a week—in dusty decrepit attics in textile shops where they barely made enough to cover their bus fare to work. Under such dreadful conditions, Chun Tae-il committed suicide in 1970 to call attention to their desperation. Women mobilized to win human rights and democratic unions.

¹⁰ Chung Hyun-back, "Together and Separately: 'The New Women's Movement' After the 1980s in South Korea," *Asian Women*, Fall 1997, Vol. 5, p. 21.

(Where unions did exist, they were company or yellow unions). In 1970, 165 strikes broke out, and by 1974, the number grew to 666.¹¹ Women workers comprised and led a self-governed and democratic labor movement throughout the 1970s.

In August 1979, all of Korea was profoundly affected by a sit-in of mainly young women workers after 4000 of them were fired from YH Company. Hundreds of riot police attacked the women, opposition politicians and journalists, killing one woman and injuring dozens more people. As a result Kim Young-sam was expelled from the parliament—leading to demonstrations in his home region of Pusan and Masan, which were brutally suppressed by the army. In the resulting turmoil, President Park Chun-hee was killed by his own chief of intelligence—precipitating Chun Doo-hwan’s coup d’etat and the Gwangju Uprising and massacre. The YH incident also led to hundreds of women attempting to form the first autonomous women’s workers association.

Women’s labor activism in the 1970s contributed to the democratization movement of the 1980s in several ways: they promoted the rise of an opposition consciousness and Minjung ideology; they helped consolidate opposition groups; and they expanded the concept of human rights and democracy. The Minjung identity that was at the heart of the 1980s democratization movement originated in part in the suffering of female factory workers and the rallying of scores of groups that came to their assistance.¹² Rather than viewing the democratic movement of the 1980s as a new wave, as do many analysts, the women’s struggles of the 1970s should be comprehended as the midwife of

¹¹ Statistics of the Federation of Korea Trade Unions ().

¹² Miriam Ching Yoon Louie, “*Minjung* Feminism: Korean Women’s Movement for Gender and Class Liberation,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 18 (4): 1995, pp. 417- 430.

the democracy movement.¹³ Moreover the Korean women's labor movement became a model for similar movements that subsequently emerged in Southeast Asia.¹⁴ In the 1980s, as women's studies programs grew and women's groups broadly developed, they played a direct role in the heroic victory of 1987. After the overthrow of the military dictatorship, the feminist movement has continued to broaden the meaning of democracy and enlarge its social impact.

Female Archetypes and Democratization

Asian traditions are full of women political leaders. Some two thousand years ago the Trung sisters were at the forefront of a successful Vietnamese independence movement against China. After their initial defeat, the Chinese Han regrouped and sent an even larger army to retake Vietnam. Mounted on elephants, the Trung sisters led the resistance, but when it became clear the Chinese would win this battle, they took their own lives rather than submit to Chinese conquest. These Vietnamese "Cleopatras"—if I may call them that—emerged from a strong tradition of female leadership in Vietnam, including the passing of land from one generation of women to another.

I wish to call attention to my use of the term "Vietnamese Cleopatra" in reference to the Trung sisters. The last of the Ptolemies—the Greek rulers of Egypt after the death of Alexander the Great—Cleopatra's life and suicide occurred a few decades before the Trung sisters befell a similar fate. Despite the chronological precedence of Cleopatra, some people may regard my above characterization of the Trung sisters as containing a

¹³ See Nam Jeong- Lim, "Women's Labor Movement, State Suppression, and Democratization in South Korea," in *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2002, pp. 71- 95.

¹⁴ Chung, op. cit., p. 24.

dose of Eurocentrism. Very often in discussions of the role of women, Greek archetypes are used. At last year's conference on the Gwangju Uprising, the 2nd International Conference in Commemoration of the May 18th People's Uprising, one of the speakers used the story of Antigone to discuss women and democratization. In Sophocles' play, Antigone defied the tyrannical King Creon of Thebes when he ordered that her brother's dead body be left in a field as food for vultures.

Greek civilization, as Karl Marx noted, has a universal appeal. Although not necessarily founded on real persons, archetypes reveal something essential about cultures. Since they embody patterns of behavior familiar to particular cultures, they are well received and transmitted from one generation to another for hundreds of years. In my view, there are dimensions of Korean culture with a universal appeal similar to the Greek mythological characters of Antigone and Electra. Since we are in Gwangju for the 3rd International Conference in Commemoration of the May 18th People's Uprising, let me explore the meaning of a mythological woman known to every Korean—Song Chunhyang.

According to legend, Chunhyang refused to submit to the sexual demands of Byon Sa-to, the King's newly appointed governor-general of Cholla-do who ruthlessly raised taxes and demanded that local women satisfy his sexual desires. Chunhyang's loyalty to Lee Mong-young, the son of the previous governor, and her desire to remain faithful to him alone (a version of patriarchal monogamy), led her to resist Byon sa-to's demand that she be his lover. For her stubborn resistance, the governor ordered her severely beaten again and again, bringing her to the point of death. At the governor's birthday

celebration, she was to be executed, but Lee Mong-young had secretly returned to Cholla-do. Horrified to learn that Byon had tortured so innocent and beautiful a person as his lover Chunhyang, he organized a palace coup that expelled the evil governor and returned Cholla-do to harmony. The story of Chunhyang epitomizes the purity of Cholla-do and has come to be the most widely performed of the region's unique *pansori* music.

The normal interpretation of Chunhyang is that she represents Korean women's subservience to men during the Chosun dynasty. According to this view, there could be no more anti-feminist story than Chunhyang's. At one point in the Chosun Dynasty, patriarchal monogamy was modified for men to be permitted to have a concubine in addition to a wife (although children born to concubines were considered inferior). The ideal wife guarded her chastity and continually sacrificed herself to her husband and her family. Women's intelligence was so undervalued (often regarded as impossible) that few were taught to read. (Even as late as 1930, 92% of Korean women were illiterate.¹⁵)

Not only was Chunhyang an "inferior" child of a concubine, but her lover was from the yang ban upper class—a terrible class dynamic present in the plot. Chunhyang's unwed mother was a concubine (), and because Lee Mong-young's father was a powerful yang ban, he and Chunhyang were an impossible couple. Despite his love for Chunhyang, Mong-young took a wealthy yang ban's daughter for his wife while he was in the capital preparing for his life as a high public official. Thus Chunhyang is

¹⁵ Chung, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

nothing but the recitation of the freedom of the rich (and men) to merrily cavort while the poor (and women) remain behind. Her lover freely leaves her behind and marries a rich woman, while she is expected to remain faithful to him alone.

Despite these conservative meanings intertwined in the plot of Chunhyang, another interpretation seems to me possible: Chunhyang's individual resistance to unjust central authority, no matter how conservative the cause, is an example of the affirmation of the individual's right to choose his or her own destiny. In Im Kwon-tek's movie version of Chunhyang, her stubborn refusal and sacrifice helped to precipitate larger demands for self-determination. An indigenous uprising merged with the palace revolt led by Mong-young, and after Chunhyang's liberation and recovery, the King announced a tax holiday for the region that lasted many years.

From this perspective, Chunhyang can be interpreted as a democratic role model since her rebellious behavior led to a change in government officials and policy. Not only did she get her man, albeit as a concubine, but more importantly, she affirmed the chosen way of life of the community in the face of the attempted penetration of the indigenous life-world by outside authority. Can we similarly interpret as modern Chunhyangs the activist women who emerged in the course of the Gwangju Uprising of 1980? Confined to subservient female roles even during the heady days of liberated Gwangju, these women nonetheless stubbornly refused to accept unjust central authority (Chun Doo Hwan's coup and the paratroopers' brutality that often took the form of sexual violence against women). They risked their own safety to preserve the communal way of life in Cholla-do. As Lee Mong-young overthrew Byon sa-to to protect Chunhyang, so Yoon

Sang-won and the men of the Citizen's Army asked the women to leave to protect them from the imminent violence of the army's assault.

Thoughts on the Future of Korean Social Movements

Are traditional cultural forms resources that can be mobilized or impediments to the emergence of liberatory social movements? Perhaps they are both. Gwangju communalism, a daily facet of life here so dear to me, can be both a wonderfully rich dimension of everyday experience, one that provides a rich resource for the mobilization of collective action, or a social superego that obstructs individual liberty (sexual freedom as but one example) and creates a social space which often diminishes the worth of younger people and women. In the U.S. as in much of the West, collective action is inhibited by advanced social atomization and ingrained patterns of competition, individualism and male egotism. In contrast, Korean communalism, while hierarchical and sometimes authoritarian, facilitates collective action.

If patterns that we can observe in European and US social movements are any indication of what Korean social movements may have in store for them, I can make two statements with some certainty:

1. Traditional forms of culture are rapidly disappearing as globalization advances.
2. Autonomous women's organizations will continue to lead in the future.

What for some people is the fragmentation of united movements into the "politics of identity" and "new social movements" appears already to be occurring in Korea. This process of differentiation and specialization, while mirroring these same dynamics in the society at large, requires further study and theorizing. At this point I would like to

mention one insight I can offer. The universal interest so often regarded as being lost with the emergence of fragmented “new social movements” may actually reside in the specificity of identity movements. The women’s movement, for example, while at first glance only based upon the interests of half of society, actually contains within it the promise of the liberation of all humans from oppressive patriarchal relationships.¹⁶

Decolonizing—and democratizing—everyday life is complex process. In my experience, I have noticed a marked tendency toward the politicization of previously unquestioned patterns of daily life in the West. In Germany, many people consciously make a political decision never to have children based upon their conviction that overpopulation is a threat to the planet’s survival. Many of these men then have vasectomies, because they believe contraception should not be an issue just for women. More than a few women have consciously chosen not to have sexual relations with men at all because of patriarchy’s insidious character. Instead, they openly advocate lesbianism and gay relationships. In many US cities, the movement is led by and oriented toward the needs of its homosexual and lesbian members. Already in the Philippines, lesbians play a publicly outspoken role in the movement.

The dialectical interplay between consciously remolding everyday patterns of life—the cultural revolution—and uprooting oppressive structures of government and economics—what is traditionally regarded as the arena of revolution—requires great attention in the coming period. Whatever activists and scholars may conclude, it is

¹⁶ For further discussion of the universal interests of the species, see the last chapter of *The Subversion of Politics*.

certain that women will be in the forefront, as the global battle for democracy grows ever larger.