

Women, Reform, and the Nation: Transnational Feminist Thought in East Asia, 1870–1920

By: Holly Farley

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Thesis Title

Holly Farley

Author's Name

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Date

Jackson College of Graduate Studies at the University of Central Oklahoma
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By

Committee Chairperson

Dr. Xiao-Bing Li

Committee Member

Dr. Erik Huneke

Committee Member

Dr. Andrew Magnusson

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Abstract

This research analyzes the development of modern East Asian womanhood during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period marked by rapid national transformation in Japan, China, and Korea. Through a comparative reading of primary sources, including feminist essays, women's magazines, reformist manifestos, and autobiographical writings alongside secondary scholarship on gender, nationalism, and modernity, the paper argues that women across East Asia were simultaneously objects and agents of reform.¹ State-driven ideologies such as Japan's "good wife, wise mother" doctrine, China's competing revolutionary and Confucian pedagogies, and Korea's struggles under both internal reform and Japanese colonial rule established repressive models of femininity that sought to control female bodies, labor, and citizenship. Yet these same constraints generated powerful counter-discourses: writers like Na Hye-sŏk, Ding Ling, and He-Yin Zhen challenged moral conventions, articulated alternative perspectives of female subjectivity, and exposed contradictions embedded in modernization projects.

By situating these voices within their broader political and intellectual networks, this research demonstrates that modern womanhood in East Asia cannot be reduced to a uniform, state-produced identity. Instead, it emerged through negotiation among reformers, nationalists, colonial authorities, and women themselves, whose writings illuminate competing representations of education, sexuality, domesticity, and public participation. Ultimately, this research highlights the extent to which gender functioned as both a symbolic tool of national

¹ I chose education, print culture, and civic associations because together they represent the three most historically significant and widely recognized mechanisms through which East Asian women accessed, negotiated, and reshaped modernity. Each of these tools provides a different but complementary lens for tracing how women moved from traditional social structures into new public roles during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

progress and its ongoing terrain of resistance. The findings underscore the necessity of examining women's experiences and writings not as peripheral to East Asian modernization but as central to understanding its ideological, social, and cultural transformations.

Introduction

The decades between 1870 and 1920 represented a period of profound upheaval and transformation across East Asia. In China, Japan, and Korea, the pressures of external opposition, internal crisis, and rapid modernization compelled states to undertake sweeping reforms in the name of national survival. Yet amid this flurry of political, military, and social change, women often remained sidelined, invoked as symbols of national virtue or reform, but rarely granted full participation in modernization. This chapter of history thus offers a significant window into how gender, nation-building, and modernity intersect in a region grappling with both tradition and transformation.

Japan's trajectory offers one of the most dramatic illustrations of this dynamic. Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan embarked on an ambitious program of industrialization, legal reform, and military modernization to catch up with Western imperial powers.² Wars such as the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 underscored the urgency of national consolidation and armed preparedness, defining the state's priorities in terms of defense, infrastructure, and centralization.³ Within this environment, a woman's potential and position in society were reimagined; she went from being a housewife to an individual responsible for maintaining moral virtue in her home. The phrase most commonly used was "good wife, wise mother" (良妻賢母, *ryōsai kenbo*), which encapsulated the ideal of

² Sumiko Sekiguchi, "Gender in the Meiji Renovation: Confucian 'Lessons for Women' and the Making of Modern Japan," *Social Science Japan Journal* 11, no. 2 (2008): 201–221.

³ "Becoming Modern: Early 20th-Century Japan through Primary Sources," Program for Teaching East Asia, University of Colorado Boulder, 2015.

womanhood in service to the nation.⁴ Therefore, even as Japanese women gained opportunities for schooling and social reform, the logic of national modernization often constrained their autonomy, prioritizing their role in supporting male state-actors rather than empowering them as full citizens.

In China, the end of the 19th century brought a cascade of crises, military defeats, humiliating treaties, and internal rebellions that weakened the Qing dynasty and galvanized reformist currents.⁵ The Hundred Days' Reform of 1898 and the later Republican transition in 1911 emerged from a sense that national revival required not only military and economic transformation but also cultural renewal.⁶ Women, in turn, were drawn into reform discourses as "mothers of the citizenry" and educated agents, a role that Empress Dowager Cixi illustrated during her reign; yet legal and institutional change often lacked more progressive rhetoric, words that were empty of meaningful change for women.⁷ During this period, female reformers began to organize schools, journals, and associations, yet their activism remained overshadowed by the more immediate imperative of national survival.⁸ Thus, for Chinese women, the task of emancipation was entwined with, and at times subordinated to, the broader project of modernizing the nation.

⁴ Reiko Ninomiya, *Institutionalization of Motherhood in Japan: The Evolution of "Mother" since the Meiji Restoration of 1868* (M.A. thesis, University of Washington, 1996).

⁵ Zhan Zhang, "Cixi and the Modernization of China," *Asian Social Science* v.6, n.4 (2010); 154.

⁶ Danni Cai, "Rethinking the Late Qing Reforms from a Gender-Network Perspective," *IIAS Review*.

⁷ Xuefei Zhang & Xiaoming Yang, "How Social Transformation Is Affecting Female Clothing Change in the Late Qing Dynasty and the Early Republic of China," *Asian Social Science* v.16, n.10 (2020); 53.

⁸ "Politics, Poetics, and Gender in Late Qing China," Stanford University Press, Table of Contents.

Korean women's experience during this period also reflected these complex intersections of nationalism, modernization, and gender. The late Joseon state faced both internal reforms (such as the Gabo Reform of 1894) and increasing Japanese influence, culminating in the 1910 annexation.⁹ In response, Korean reformers and educators emphasized education, missionary schooling, and cultural renewal as vehicles of national resistance and modernization.¹⁰ Women's education, primarily through institutions such as Ewha Haktang, became a battleground for gender modernity.¹¹ While colonial influence and traditional Confucian hierarchies limited women's civic and political positions, this research will also address how this contention would play out in the schoolroom. In Korea, then, the promise of reform was filtered through both nationalist exigency and colonial constraints, shaping the ways women's roles were framed and contested.

Across these three regions, several patterns emerge. First, modernization in East Asia was driven by a crisis of military defeats, imperial ambivalence, and internal disagreements pushed states toward reform. Second, women's status in this process was ambiguous. While reformers and states invoked women as a crucial part of national regeneration, women's own agency was often restricted by patriarchal expectations and state priorities. Third, the tools of modernity, including education, print culture, and civic associations, became options for women who wanted to engage in these discourses, a conversation that the state's agenda often defined on its own terms.

⁹ Vladimir Tikhonov, "Masculinizing the Nation: Gender Ideologies in Traditional Korea and in the 1890s-1900s Korean Enlightenmentpoliticsscource," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, 4 (2007): 1029-1065.

¹⁰ Midori Raymond, "The Female Experience with Nationalism, Feminism, and Han in Post-Choson Korea," *BYU Asian Studies Journal* 6 (2021).

¹¹ "Ideology: 'Wise Mother, Good Wife' (Hyönmo Yangch'ö)," in *Gender Politics at Home and Abroad*, Cambridge University Press.

Understanding this context is essential for a comparative study of East Asian women's reform movements. The national crises that occurred would play a significant role in how women were allowed to behave, as would legislation that prevented women from engaging in sensitive conversations with men as equals. Opportunities for female education and activism may have expanded, but they emerged within frameworks that prioritized national strength, moral discipline, and social order over full gender equality. Thus, the activism of women in Japan, China, and Korea cannot be understood solely in local terms; instead, they must be placed within the broader framework of alternative modernization, national reform, and regional exchange.¹²

Where alternative modernization is concerned, it is a concept used to describe cultures and civilizations that have been altered by many factors rather than a single course. By situating women's experiences in the era of 1870 to 1920 within these larger political and social transformations, this framework of alternative modernization calls attention to the ways that education, print culture, and reformist activism served both as tools of inclusion and as instruments of control. This study argues that women in East Asia were not simply passive recipients of modernization; they were active, self-aware participants who engaged with reformist discourses, negotiated their own agency, and simultaneously revealed the limitations of state-led modernization in achieving gender justice.

The Status of Women Before Reform

Before the transformative decades that followed 1870, the status of women across East Asia: Japan, China, and Korea were defined by Confucian patriarchal expectations that had been

¹² The term "alternative modernization" is a theoretical framework that challenges the idea that all societies must follow a single, Western-derived path to modernity. Instead, I argue throughout this research that modernity is not monolithic; change for women was fluid, with outcomes shaped by one's cultural, gender, and social needs. The process of modernization is based on local histories, power structures, and traditions. Rather than viewing modernization as a linear progression toward liberal democracy, industrial capitalism, and Western models of gender equality, the theory proposes that societies create hybrid, context-specific blends of tradition and modernity.

deeply embedded in society. These practices were not static; they evolved and transformed under the pressures of foreign intrusion, economic modernization, and shifting national priorities. Yet, in all three societies, gender hierarchies formed the bedrock of moral, familial, and political order. Women's roles were framed as prioritizing domestic virtue and filial duty over community engagement and personal desires. In each nation, the pursuit of reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emerged from crises of sovereignty and national, rather than individual, identity. As these societies sought ways to modernize their economies and political systems in response to Western imperialism and regional competition, women became symbols of moral revivals, rather than individuals with equal rights to men.

Confucian Foundations and Gender Ideology

The ideology that supported gender relations in East Asia stemmed largely from Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, particularly the emphasis on the "Three Obediences" (*san cong*) and "Four Virtues" (*si de*).¹³ These moral codes require women to obey their father before marriage, their husband after marriage, and their son in widowhood. The virtues of morality, proper speech, modest appearance, and diligence shaped the expectations for women's conduct. In practice, these teachings, circulated through her education, family manuals, and ritual expectations, ensured that women were confined to the domestic sphere.

Yet, these doctrines also varied across regions. In China, Confucian classics such as the *Book of Rites* and the *Liji* were foundational to the imperial examination system, embedding male moral superiority into the very structure of governance.¹⁴ In Japan, Neo-Confucianism

¹³ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 23–26.

¹⁴ Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 56.

during the Tokugawa period (1603–1868) intertwined with feudal hierarchies, reinforcing both social and gender-based stratification.¹⁵¹⁶ Korea's Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) adopted the most rigid interpretation of Confucian patriarchy, transforming gender hierarchy into state orthodoxy through legislation and social customs.¹⁷

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the Confucian gender order began to face new challenges. The Opium Wars in China, the Meiji Restoration in Japan, and the infiltration of Western powers into Korea through treaties and missionary networks forced a reevaluation of what it meant to be a "modern nation." Modernization came to be understood as both technological progress and social reorganization, a process that paradoxically reaffirmed women's subordination as the keepers of tradition even as it called for their enlightenment.

Japan: Meiji Modernity and the Re-inscription of Gender

The Meiji Restoration (1868) represented the most rapid and deliberate modernization effort in East Asia. Through the Charter Oath and following reforms, Japan sought to "enrich the country and strengthen the army" (*fukoku kyōhei*), aiming to secure recognition as a modern power and resist Western imperialism.¹⁸ The new Meiji state promoted universal education, industrialization, and constitutional government. Despite the transformations taking place, these new reforms that promised equality among its subjects did not extend to women. The *Ritsuryō*

¹⁵ Marcia Yonemoto, *The Problem of Women in Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), p 78.

¹⁶ Neo-Confucianism differs from original Confucianism primarily by incorporating metaphysical and spiritual elements from Buddhism and Daoism, which traditional Confucianism largely avoided. In my research, *Neo-Confucianism* refers to the patriarchal ideological system of Joseon Korea that defined women's roles as domestic, subordinate, and limited. Early feminist activism and modernization discourse emerged in opposition to this framework, trying to redefine women's place in society in ways that supported national progress.

¹⁷ Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 14–18.

¹⁸ Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 340.

codes and Tokugawa family laws were replaced by a new civil code (1898) that solidified male authority as the foundation of the household and, by extension, the nation.¹⁹ Women's education, championed by reformers like Yukichi Fukuzawa in *An Encouragement of Learning* (*Gakumon no Susume*), was encouraged only insofar as it produced better mothers and wives capable of raising disciplined citizens.²⁰ The ideal of *ryōsai kenbo* ("good wife, wise mother") became the state's ideological cornerstone for encouraging female education.²¹

The Meiji government's victories in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and Russo-Japanese War (1904–05) reinforced this model. These military successes were celebrated as evidence of Japan's modernity and, by extension, its dominance. Despite Japan's success, women's roles remained confined to the home, where their most meaningful work was producing soldiers, managing households, and embodying moral virtue.²² The feminist stirrings that would later emerge during the Taishō period were thus shaped by a contradictory legacy: modernization without emancipation.

China: The Crisis of Empire and the Feminization of Righteousness

China's defeat in the Opium Wars (1839–42, 1856–60) and the upcoming loss of sovereignty through unfair treaties shattered imperial confidence in the moral order that had governed China for centuries.²³ The Qing dynasty (1644–1911) responded with a combination of

¹⁹ Vera Mackie, *Creating Socialist Women in Japan, 1900–1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15–16.

²⁰ Yukichi Fukuzawa, *An Encouragement of Learning* (Tokyo: Keio University Press, 1969), 88.

²¹ Sharon Nolte and Sally Ann Hastings, "The Meiji State's Policy Toward Women, 1890–1910," *Modern Asian Studies* 18, no. 3 (1984): 531–548.

²² Sheldon Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds: The State in Everyday Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 57.

²³ John Fairbank, *China: A New History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1998), 203–205.

conservative adjustments and cautious reforms. With China's circumstances changing, women were drawn into new forms of discourse. The ending of the examination system, the Taiping Rebellion, and the Self-Strengthening Movement all exposed the limitations of a male-centered model of education and honor. Reformers began to suggest that the ignorance of China's women was primarily responsible for the empire's failure.

The late Qing reformist Kang Youwei, in his *Datong Shu* (Book of Great Unity), envisioned a utopian society where gender equality was possible, though his vision remained theoretical.²⁴ Qichao Liang, another prominent reformer, articulated a more pragmatic version in his writings on the "new citizen mother" (xin guomin zhi mu), arguing that women's education was essential to producing patriotic and civilized citizens.²⁵ The late Qing also saw a growing popularity of women's periodicals, such as *Nüxuebao* (The Women's Education Journal), which called for the "moral awakening" of women as the foundation of social regeneration.²⁶

While this recognition of women's education is critical to this larger conversation, these requests for women's enlightenment were framed through a national lens: women were to serve the nation as moral guardians rather than political equals. Footbinding, arranged marriage, and female seclusion persisted despite the growing popularity of reformist rhetoric. The paradox of China's modernity lay in its attempt to blend Confucian moralism with Western notions of

²⁴ Kang Youwei, *The One-World Philosophy of Kang Youwei* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 77–80.

²⁵ Qichao Liang, "On Women's Education," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Vol. 2*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960); 225.

²⁶ Joan Judge, *The Precious Raft of History: The Past, the West, and the Woman Question in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 63.

progress. This attempt repeatedly failed, only further solidifying gender equality as an extension of national strength.²⁷

Korea: Colonial Encroachment and the Transformation of Virtue

Korea entered the modern era amid geopolitical turmoil and the foreshadowing of imperial influence. The late nineteenth century saw the weakening of the Joseon monarchy and increased interference from both China and Japan. After Japan's victory in the Sino-Japanese War, Korea declared independence from Qing suzerainty, only to fall under Japanese protectorate status by 1905 and full annexation in 1910.²⁸

During the late Joseon period, Confucian gender hierarchies had reached their most unyielding form. Widow chastity, lineage purity, and female domestic confinement were upheld as moral requirements, considered critical to maintaining "proper" social order.²⁹ Women's education was virtually nonexistent, and literacy among women remained limited to upper-class circles. Missionary schools introduced in the late nineteenth century, such as Ewha Haktang (founded 1886), became the first spaces where Korean women could receive formal instruction.³⁰ However, these new institutions were not established with women's liberation in mind; the women who brought them in to teach these young girls were missionaries and other Christian women who wanted to instill their Western Christian values. These conservative ethics only

²⁷ Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 41.

²⁸ Alexis Dudden, *Japan's Colonization of Korea: Discourse and Power* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 28.

²⁹ Hyaewool Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea: New Women, Old Ways* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 44.

³⁰ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 50-51.

further challenged and reinforced traditional gender roles, but now through a Western Christian lens incorporated with Confucian ideals.

The early Korean reform movement (*Gaehwa undong*) positioned women as symbols of moral reform, arguing that "a nation cannot rise if its women remain in ignorance."³¹ Yet, under Japanese colonial rule, women experienced two-fold oppression: the state promoted limited education as part of its "civilizing mission," but suppressed feminist and nationalist activism.³² By the 1910s, Korean women like Na Hye-sök and Kim Hwal-lan began to envision a distinctly modern female identity that navigated Confucian ethics, Christian morality, and nationalist sentiment.³³ Their efforts marked the beginning of a new intellectual discourse and vision for the future of Japanese women, one that recognized that women's emancipation and national independence were intertwined, but not identical.

Modernization and the Gendered Nation

Across East Asia, the drive for modernization was motivated by a shared anxiety: the fear of colonization and the desire to reclaim lost national dignity. The Meiji state's success demonstrated that adopting Western science, education, and military organization could secure sovereignty, but it also presented a negative image of as gendered nationalism that others emulated. China and Korea each adapted this model to their own conditions, much to the dismay of women, an example that prioritized national survival over women's emancipation.

Wars and political upheavals, from China's Boxer Rebellion to Japan's imperial expansion and Korea's March First Movement, were pivotal moments that revealed the

³¹ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, 213.

³² Kyung Moon Hwang, *Beyond Birth: Social Status in the Emergence of Modern Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), 162–63.

³³ Hye-sök Na, "A Woman's Life," *Sin Yeoja* 1, no. 2 (1917); 4–5.

contradictions of modernity. Women were regarded as symbols of the nation's virtue and stability during times of crisis but were excluded from direct participation in its reconstruction or any meaningful changes to their respective countries.³⁴ Reformers invoked the maternal role as a metaphor for national rebirth, yet this maternalism often reinforced patriarchal authority rather than dissolving it. By 1920, however, the intellectual groundwork for feminist reform had been laid. The translation of Western texts, the circulation of missionary education, and the rise of print media allowed women across China, Japan, and Korea to imagine new forms of citizenship, moral responsibility, and intellectual autonomy. The reform movements that followed would emerge from this disparity, advocating self-fulfillment and freedom from national bondage.

By the early 1920s, the social and political transformations that had reshaped East Asia, the merging of the Meiji state, the collapse of the Qing Empire, colonial infiltration of Korea, and the broader pressures of imperialism had yielded new definitions of progress and citizenship that were profoundly gendered. Despite reformist rhetoric invoking modernization and civilization (*bunmei kaika*, *kaehwa*, and *wenming*), women's participation in these projects remained unequal and conditional. Reformers and intellectuals often positioned women as symbolic bearers of national virtue rather than as independent citizens.³⁵ This paradox of modernity in East Asia was thus deeply gendered: modernization required women's moral and educational improvement yet denied them political equality or independent civic agency.

This tension became evident in the aftermath of war and imperial contestation. Japan's victories in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905)

³⁴ Gail Hershatter, *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); 33–35.

³⁵ Joan Judge, *Republican Lens: Gender, Visuality, and Experience in the Early Chinese Periodical Press* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 3–7.

emboldened its state-led vision of civilization and enlightenment. Yet, this same nationalist fervor reinforced domestic hierarchies that confined women to reproductive and moral purposes.³⁶ In China, the trauma of the Opium Wars, the self-strengthening reforms, and the collapse of the Qing dynasty produced an acute awareness of national weakness that reformers linked to the “backwardness” of women.³⁷ The May Fourth movement would later channel this disappointment into its stirring cultural revolution, but the gendered aspects of reform remained fraught with tension. Meanwhile, in Korea, the trauma of annexation in 1910 transformed the politics of reform into a struggle for national survival.³⁸ Under colonial rule, Korean women confronted both the patriarchal residues of Confucian tradition and the constraints of Japanese imperial education, which treated the image of the “good wife, wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo*) as a necessity for colonial discipline.³⁹

From these circumstances, reforms became a double-edged project: it promised liberation through modern education and civic participation but often reinforced patriarchal hierarchies under the guise of progress. The emergent “modern woman” became a front for these negotiations between nationalism and feminism, between self-empowerment and political exclusion, between the state’s developmental ambitions and women’s intellectual aspirations. These contradictions formed the crucible in which East Asian women’s movements took shape.

³⁶ Vera Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan: Citizenship, Embodiment, and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 22–24.

³⁷ Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 104–106.

³⁸ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 43–45.

³⁹ Janice Matsumura, “Good Wives, Wise Mothers, and the Modern Girl: Japanese Women in Colonial Korea,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 2 (2012): 373–375.

At the same time, the expansion of print culture, missionary education, and urban intellectual networks enabled women to reimagine their place within a modern nation.⁴⁰ Publications such as *Seitō* in Japan, *Funü Shibao* in China, and *Sin Yeoja* in Korea became places where feminist thought flowed freely, allowing women to articulate their own visions of citizenship and moral progress. These developments were not isolated; they reflected transnational exchanges facilitated by translation, migration, and missionary activity.⁴¹ Female reformers across the region shared a common intellectual vocabulary of enlightenment, civilization, and education, terms that simultaneously invoked Western models and localized aspirations for national renewal.

Yet, despite these shared frameworks, the historiography of East Asian women's activism has often remained fragmented by national boundaries. Earlier scholarship tended to focus on single-country narratives, portraying Chinese, Japanese, or Korean women's movements as isolated instances, emerging from their respective social conditions.⁴² More recent transnational studies go beyond this narrative to consider and trace the flow of ideas, institutions, and reformist practices that linked these women.⁴³ This research contributes to that growing body of comparative scholarship by examining how women in China, Japan, and Korea negotiated overlapping political crises, imperial pressures, and modernizing reforms between 1870 and 1920. By reading these histories in concert, rather than in isolation, we can better understand

⁴⁰ Barbara Molony and Janet Theiss, eds., *Gender in Modern East Asia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2016), 12–15.

⁴¹ Lydia Liu, "The Question of Meaning-Value in the Political Economy of the Sign," *Cultural Critique* 26 (1993): 36–39.

⁴² Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 9–11.

⁴³ Mackie, "Feminism and the Making of Modernity in East Asia," 27.

how the gendered construction of modernity in East Asia was both locally specific and regionally interconnected.

The following historiographical section surveys this evolving body of scholarship. It traces how historians have interpreted women's roles within modernization, nationalism, and empire; how feminist and postcolonial frameworks have redefined understandings of reform; and how recent transnational studies have illuminated the circulation of ideas across linguistic and political borders. By engaging with the works of scholars such as Vera Mackie, Joan Judge, Hyaeweol Choi, and Gail Hershatter, this research contributes to this larger understanding of women's activism within a growing interdisciplinary effort to recover women's intellectual labor as a constitutive force in East Asian modernity.⁴⁴ In doing so, this research approaches the modern history of East Asian women not as a supplementary narrative to political reform, but as a central lens through which modernization itself can be reinterpreted. The historiography that follows therefore serves both as a critical synthesis of existing scholarship and as a methodological foundation for the comparative analysis that forms the core of this research.

Historiography

The study of East Asian women's activism between 1870 and 1920 has undergone significant revision over the past several decades, shifting from nationalist or state-centered narratives to transnational and gendered analyses. Early historical accounts of modernization in Japan, China, and Korea primarily celebrated industrial growth, educational reform, and the rise of constitutional politics as symbols of progress. At the same time, women's experiences were

⁴⁴ Hyaeweol Choi and Margaret Jolly, eds., *Divine Domesticities: Christian Paradoxes in Asia and the Pacific* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), 56–59.

marginalized and portrayed as secondary within male reform agendas.⁴⁵ Scholars such as Lydia Liu, Vera Mackie, and Hyaeweol Choi have since challenged these limitations, arguing that women's movements emerged through complex interactions between indigenous reform efforts, Western missionary education, and the circulation of feminist ideas across linguistic and political borders.⁴⁶

The historiography considers how women's activism in East Asia was never an isolated domestic occurrence; instead, it was one forged through dialogue, translation, and contestation within a larger conversation concerning global modernity and what it meant to be a "modern woman." Early twentieth-century national histories, especially those written during the Republican period in China and the postwar decades in Japan and Korea, often framed women's progress as symbolic of modernization but failed to acknowledge women's agency, specifically, the lack thereof.⁴⁷ Instead, women appeared as allegories of national virtue or decline: the "good wife, wise mother" ideal in Japan, the "citizen-mother" in China, or the "modern daughter" in colonial Korea.⁴⁸ These ideological constructs served reformist and nationalist ends while concealing the diversity of women's voices and the disproportionate access to education and mobility that separated elite women from rural and working-class counterparts.⁴⁹ As Gail Hershatter and Joan Judge have demonstrated, the historical record was shaped by literate urban

⁴⁵ Tani E. Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 12–15.

⁴⁶ Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 27.

⁴⁷ Judge, *Republican Lens*, 4–6.

⁴⁸ Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 33.

⁴⁹ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 41–43.

elites, those who published, corresponded, and traveled, thus privileging their experience as representative of "women's modernity."⁵⁰

The emergence of feminist historiography in the 1980s and 1990s brought new attention to women as historical actors within state-building and modernization undertakings. Scholars such as Susan Mann, Dorothy Ko, and Sally McWilliams shifted analysis from "women as symbols" to "women as participants," examining education, print culture, and reform through a woman's lens, rather than a man's.⁵¹ This shift revealed that women's activism often arose from their interaction with global ideas such as Christian missions, Western liberalism, and transnational socialism, rather than from a purely indigenous awakening.⁵² Missionary schools in Korea and Japan, for example, introduced literacy and civic ideals that some women adapted for nationalist purposes. In contrast, others used them to critique patriarchy and colonial power alike.⁵³ Similarly, Chinese reformers such as Chen Hengzhe and He-Yin Zhen engaged Western thought selectively, appropriating the Enlightenment language of equality to challenge Confucian ethics without abandoning indigenous intellectual traditions.⁵⁴ These women were not passive recipients of foreign feminism but women who actively participated in this dialogue and made the necessary alterations to suit local women's needs.

⁵⁰ Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 52.

⁵¹ Judge, *Republican Lens*, 9.

⁵² Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 87.

⁵³ Ji-Eun Lee, *Women Pre-scripted: Forging Modern Roles through Korean Print* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 73–74.

⁵⁴ Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 43.

Historians like Hyaeweol Choi have deepened this argument by examining how colonialism and Christianity shaped women's modern individuality in Korea.⁵⁵ Rather than viewing missionary education as simply emancipatory or imperialist, Choi demonstrates that it created hybrid spaces in which women negotiated both oppression and empowerment. Similarly, Vera Mackie situates Japanese women's activism within global socialist and literary movements, tracing how figures such as Raichō Hiratsuka and Yosano Akiko translated Western feminist ideas into culturally relevant expressions of moral refinement and artistic selfhood.⁵⁶ These comparative studies underscore that feminist discourse in East Asia was inherently cosmopolitan yet profoundly localized, which included a blend of translation, resistance, and selective appropriation.

However, as transnational and elite women's histories began to flourish, another silence persisted: the exclusion of poor, rural, and working-class women from the historical narrative. Industrialization, migration, and agrarian crisis transformed the lives of countless women who never appeared in reformist writings or women's journals.⁵⁷ Scholars such as Hershatte and Mann have warned against equating the "modern woman" of the urban elite with the generalization of all women's experiences, noting that domestic laborers, textile workers, and peasant women often bore the burdens of modernization without access to its promised freedoms.⁵⁸ The expansion of urban schools, for example, largely benefited the daughters of

⁵⁵ Hyaeweol Choi, *New Women in Colonial Korea: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2013), 102.

⁵⁶ Vera Mackie, "The Emergence of Japanese Feminism," in *Gendering Modern Japanese History*, ed. Barbara Molony and Kathleen Uno (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005); 368.

⁵⁷ He-Yin Zhen, "On the Question of Women's Liberation," in *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, ed. Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl, and Dorothy Ko (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); 53–55.

⁵⁸ Hershatte, *The Gender of Memory*, 47.

merchants and bureaucrats, while rural schools remained underfunded and unreliable sources of education.⁵⁹ In Japan, the state's Meiji Civil Code reinforced patriarchal authority within the household, leaving rural women legally confined to their husbands and male relatives even as elite feminists freely debated citizenship.⁶⁰ Similarly, in China, while reformers praised the "new citizen mother," peasant women continued to labor in patriarchal family economies with little institutional support for their education or legal autonomy.⁶¹

Recent historiography has begun to recover these overlooked experiences. Hershatter's *The Gender of Memory* and Tani Barlow's analyses of social reproduction reframe women's work and domestic labor as integral to the story of modernity rather than peripheral to it.⁶² Through oral histories, labor records, and visual archives, their research demonstrates how women who lacked formal political voice were still able to participate in processes of modernization through textile work, migration, and household management that were necessary for national economies.⁶³ This broader interpretive frame exposes the limits of nationalist feminism: even as educated women demanded political rights, they often imitated hierarchies that excluded the very classes upon whose labor their modern identity rested.

The historiography of print culture has also evolved from celebrating women's intellectual awakening to analyzing the networks of translation and circulation that sustained it. Joan Judge's *Republican Lens* demonstrates that journals such as *Funü Shibao* and *New Woman*

⁵⁹ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 77.

⁶⁰ Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, 29–31.

⁶¹ Judge, *Republican Lens*, 22–23.

⁶² Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 83.

⁶³ Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 101–102.

in China served as transnational spaces of debate, where ideas about suffrage, hygiene, and morality circulated between Shanghai, Tokyo, and Seoul.⁶⁴ Likewise, Korean scholars such as Ji-Eun Lee have traced the influence of Japanese feminist print networks on early Korean reformist writing, revealing how colonial censorship paradoxically intensified women's creative subversion.⁶⁵ These studies dismantle the assumption that modern feminist thought emerged in isolation; instead, it was a dialogic process shaped by circulation and constraint, reception and rearticulation.

Another significant development in this historical field concerns how war, imperialism, and state consolidation limited the reach of women's reform.⁶⁶ The Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05), and Japan's annexation of Korea (1910) transformed gender politics by reorienting reform toward national strength and imperial legitimacy.⁶⁷ As Vera Mackie argues, Japanese feminism became entangled with imperial nationalism, with women encouraged to serve as champions of virtue and mothers of soldiers rather than independent citizens.⁶⁸ In Korea, the colonial administration co-opted women's education into the machinery of imperial subject formation, while suppressing overt feminist organization.⁶⁹ Chinese women's participation in the 1911 Revolution and the May Fourth Movement, though significant, remained artificial when even male reformers encouraged the boasting of gender equality to

⁶⁴ Choi, *New Women in Colonial Korea*, 98.

⁶⁵ Hershatler, *The Gender of Memory*, 124.

⁶⁶ Mann, *Precious Records*, 243.

⁶⁷ Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, 72.

⁶⁸ Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 110.

⁶⁹ Mackie, "The Emergence of Japanese Feminism," 389.

national salvation.⁷⁰ In each case, the notion of modernization positioned women as instruments of progress but rarely as autonomous agents of reform.

Despite these political structures, women developed subtle forms of resistance. Korean reformers like Na Hye-sök used Christian ethics and modern art to critique colonial patriarchy; Japanese activists employed literary modernism to share the lives of women beyond state ideology; Chinese writers turned domestic discourse into a metaphorical arena for social reform.⁷² These acts, while limited in reach, formed the intellectual bedrock of feminist thought in later decades. Contemporary historians thus argue that researchers must attempt to understand women's reform movements as evolving within, rather than outside, imperial and nationalist constraints.⁷³

The historiographical trajectory of East Asian women's studies reveals a movement from absence to presence, from elite-centered narratives to socially grounded and transnational frameworks. Yet significant gaps remain. Class, rurality, and ethnicity continue to receive less attention than elite print culture and political activism.⁷⁴ Moreover, as historians increasingly adopt comparative and translingual methodologies, new questions arise about how to balance local narratives with regional synthesis.⁷⁵ The challenge is to write a history that recognizes East

⁷⁰ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 132.

⁷¹ When I say that Chinese women's participation in the 1911 Revolution and the May Fourth Movement was "artificial," I do not mean that women's actions were not genuine. Women worked, organized, wrote, protested, and sacrificed. Their participation was very real. What was "artificial" refers to the way male reformers framed and used women's involvement, not the women themselves.

⁷² Judge, *Republican Lens*, 179.

⁷³ Hershatler, *The Gender of Memory*, 206.

⁷⁴ Sally McWilliams, "Gendering Modernity: Feminism and the Family in Late Nineteenth-Century East Asia," *Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 2 (2002): 346–47.

⁷⁵ Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 125.

Asian women as creators of modernity, while also acknowledging that the majority of them labored, taught, and suffered in obscurity, their stories mediated through those with the literacy and privilege to record them.

In this evolving historiography, East Asian women appear not merely as inheritors of modernity but as its architects and critics. The modern woman of Tokyo, Shanghai, or Seoul was simultaneously a product of global currents and a reflection of local struggles. By tracing these intersections between empire and education, class and citizenship, feminism and nationalism, historians continue to reimagine what it means to speak of women's modernity in East Asia, a project still unfinished and continually rewritten.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Choi, *New Women in Colonial Korea*, 156.

Chapter One: Nation Before Gender: Feminism, Reform, and Modern Citizenship in Meiji Japan

The period between 1870 and 1920 in Japan represents one of the most profound social and ideological transformations in modern history. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 inaugurated a new era of political reform, technological modernization, and national consolidation, which instigated an upheaval that fundamentally altered the role of women in society. As Japan sought to define itself as a modern nation-state capable of standing alongside the Western powers, it also had to reimagine the margins of citizenship, morality, and family life.⁷⁷ Yet, while the Meiji state adopted modern institutions, its policies regarding women were steeped in Confucian patriarchy, creating what historians have called a "gendered nationalism," one in which women's education and social participation were justified not as a matter of equality, but to strengthen the nation.

This research builds on the framework that examines how nationalism and modernization intersect with early feminist activism. Women's reforms in Meiji Japan were deeply intertwined in debates over civilization, sovereignty, and the nation's moral identity. Feminism was neither wholly indigenous nor entirely Western; rather, it emerged from within the contradictions of Japan's modernization project. As Vera Mackie observes, "feminism in Japan was born not in opposition to modernity but as a constituent part of it."⁷⁸ The Meiji state used the concept of womanhood as a moral and cultural battleground: to reform women was to reform the nation itself. Female education, once limited to Confucian domestic instruction, became a tool of state-building. Yet women's activism did not arise in simple opposition to these reforms; rather, it

⁷⁷ Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 47.

⁷⁸ Mackie, *Feminism in Modern*, 14–15.

emerged through them. Reformers such as Fukuzawa, who argued that “Heaven is said to create no man on the top of a man or under.”⁷⁹ saw women’s enlightenment as integral to Japan’s modernization, even as they framed this equality in service to the nation.

My research expands upon this framework by examining how early calls for women’s education were produced within a nationalist discourse that tied the enlightenment of women directly to national progress. Texts such as *The Independent’s* “Circular for the Establishment of a Girls’ School” illustrate how reformers used modernization theory to justify expanding women’s educational opportunities, presenting gender reform as vital to strengthening the nation. By situating this appeal within broader debates about modernization, you show that early feminist activism was shaped by political and national imperatives, rather than emerging purely from gender-centered concerns. In doing so, this research follows and extends scholarship that explores the mutually reinforcing yet sometimes conflicting relationship among nationalism, social reform, and women’s rights.

Thus, this study considers women's activism between 1870 and 1920 as a complex negotiation among Confucian ethics, Western liberalism, primarily concerning missionary influence, national policy, and their direct impacts on Japanese women. It asks: to what extent did women's reforms serve the goals of emancipation, and to what extent were they instrumentalized for the modern state's nationalist agenda? By investigating educational reform, moral ideology, early feminist organizations, and the "good wife, wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo*) discourse, this paper argues that Meiji Japan's women's movement embodied a paradox of liberation and oppression, where women were empowered as moral citizens, yet confined within the patriarchal framework of national progress.

⁷⁹ Fukuzawa, *An Encouragement of Learning*, 1:4

The Meiji Restoration and the Politics of “Good Wife, Wise Mother”

In 1868, the overthrow of the Tokugawa shogunate and the restoration of imperial rule marked the beginning of Japan's rapid modernization. The Meiji oligarchs, seeking to emulate Western powers, framed civilization (*bunmei kaika*) as the measure of national strength.⁸⁰ Within this ideological landscape, women became symbols of Japan's success or failure to modernize. Japan's aspirations would come to include changes in education, morality, and domestic order, which were therefore central to the state's reform agenda. The Meiji government's 1872 Education Ordinance (Gakusei) established universal education for both boys and girls, a radical departure from Tokugawa social norms.⁸¹ Yet, the purpose of girls' education was not to cultivate independence or critical thought, but rather to reinforce their role as moral custodians of the household.⁸²

By the 1890s, this was formalized in the "good wife, wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo*) ideal, which prescribed that women's highest contribution to the nation lay in domestic virtue and motherhood. As Sabine Fröhstück notes, this ideology functioned as "a moral technology of the state," and would determine that women were intended to embody national modernism.⁸³ The Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890 codified these ideals into state doctrine. It urged loyalty, filial piety, and harmony between husband and wife, values rooted in Neo-Confucian

⁸⁰ Sharon L. Sievers, *Flowers in Salt: The Beginnings of Feminist Consciousness in Modern Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 23.

⁸¹ Barbara Molony, "Women's Rights, Feminism, and Suffragism in Japan, 1870–1925," *Pacific Historical Review* 69, no. 4 (2000): 640.

⁸² "On the Cultivation of Women," *Monbushō Educational Documents*, 1875, National Diet Library Archives, Tokyo.

⁸³ Sabine Fröhstück and Anne Walthall, *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 89.

ethics and reinterpreted to support a modern constitutional monarchy.⁸⁴ While ostensibly progressive, the Rescript reinforced patriarchal authority by framing women's moral education as essential to generating loyal subjects. The home became, as Miriam Silverberg describes, "the moral crucible of the modern Japanese nation."⁸⁵

Nevertheless, the expansion of education provided an unintended avenue for women's self-awareness and activism. Literacy rates among girls increased dramatically, from 15 percent in 1872 to over 40 percent by 1900, and female teachers began to form networks of solidarity. In schools such as Tokyo Women's Normal School (founded 1875), young women were introduced to Western literature, Christian ethics, and nationalist ideals, laying the foundation for what would become Japan's first generation of modern feminists.

Confucian Legacy and State Feminism

Despite the appearance of modernization, the Meiji state's approach to women's rights was deeply shaped by Confucian gender hierarchy. The "Three Obediences" to father, husband, and son remained the moral template for female behavior.⁸⁶ The Meiji Civil Code of 1898 institutionalized these hierarchies in law, defining women as legal minors under the authority of their household head (*koshu*). According to Tadashi Karube, this legal classification "domesticated the modern woman," binding her citizenship to the family system rather than the state.⁸⁷ However, Japan's modernization attempts at gender relations cannot be reduced to

⁸⁴ Shizuko Koyama, *Ryōsai Kenbo: The Educational Ideal of 'Good Wife, Wise Mother' in Modern Japan* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 45.

⁸⁵ Sievers, *Flowers in Salt*, 49.

⁸⁶ Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths*, 102.

⁸⁷ Tadashi Karube, "Domestication of the Modern Woman: Civil Code and Family System," *Japan Forum* 15, no. 2 (2003): 206.

repression alone. Reformist intellectuals and Christian missionaries challenged Confucian orthodoxy by advocating new educational and moral foundations. Fukuzawa, Japan's most prominent liberal thinker, argued in his *Gakumon no Susume (An Encouragement of Learning, 1872–76)* that it is a great mistake to think that men are superior and women inferior by nature," calling for women's education as essential to the nation's progress.⁸⁸

Yet even these reformers often upheld patriarchal assumptions. Fukuzawa's vision of gender equality remained superficial; women's education was justified insofar as it produced better citizens and mothers. This duality exemplifies what Shizuko Koyama calls "state feminism": a policy framework that expanded women's social roles while reinforcing their subordination to the nation.⁸⁹ The emergence of women's schools, Christian societies, and temperance unions during the 1880s and 1890s reveals how state and reformist agendas overlapped, producing what Janet Hunter describes as "a complex dance between emancipation and discipline."⁹⁰

The Confucian legacy persisted not only in law but in social expectations. Public discourse portrayed women as symbols of cultural continuity amidst rapid Westernization.⁹¹ Female magazines such as *Jogaku Zasshi* (The Women's Education Journal, founded 1885) reflected this vagueness: they promoted literacy and moral refinement while urging modesty and obedience.¹⁸ Writers like Nakashima Tsuruko and Yosano Akiko, however, began to contest these prescriptions. Akiko's 1901 poetry collection *Midaregami (Tangled Hair)* celebrated

⁸⁸ Fukuzawa, *An Encouragement of Learning*, 1:4.

⁸⁹ Koyama, *Ryōsai Kenbo*, 118.

⁹⁰ Janet Hunter, "Women and Work in the Meiji Period," *Japan Forum* 1, no. 2 (1989); 165.

⁹¹ Koyama, *Ryōsai Kenbo*, 67.

female desire and individuality, a radical departure from the moral restraint of *ryōsai kenbo*.⁹² Her declaration, was that her life shall burn bright like the morning star, unafraid of heaven's gaze, captured the spirit of resistance brewing beneath Japan's disciplined modernity. By the early twentieth century, the contradictions of Meiji gender policy became increasingly apparent. The state had produced educated women capable of public participation but denied them political agency. Feminists such as Raichō Hiratsuka, founder of the *Seitō* (*Bluestocking*) society in 1911, would inherit this paradox, struggling to redefine womanhood beyond the nation's boundaries.

Christian Feminism and the Birth of the Women's Movement

By the 1880s, a new form of activism emerged through Japan's Christian women's networks, which became crucial in translating Western notions of womanhood into the Japanese context. Christianity, introduced by missionaries after the ban was lifted in 1873, offered women a moral and intellectual space outside the constraints of Confucian patriarchy.⁹³ The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), founded in Japan in 1886 under the leadership of Kishida Toshiko and Uchida Shigeko, exemplified this hybrid activism. Although inspired by American prohibition reformers like Frances Willard, Japanese members connected temperance to broader concerns about morality, family stability, and women's public virtue.⁹⁴ Christianity's appeal to women stemmed from its dual promise: salvation and social reform. Mission schools such as Ferris Seminary, Doshisha Women's School, and Aoyama Girls' School offered female students not only religious instruction but also exposure to Western liberal thought, hygiene, and civic

⁹² Yosano Akiko, *Tangled Hair: Selected Tanka from Midaregami*, trans. Sanford Goldstein and Seishi Shinoda (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1971), 5.

⁹³ Vera Mackie, *Creating Socialist Women in Japan: Gender, Labour and Activism, 1900–1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 22–24.

⁹⁴ Molony, “Women’s Rights,” 639.

responsibility.⁹⁵ These institutions cultivated an early generation of educated women who would later lead literary, educational, and suffragist movements. According to Barbara Molony, Christian feminists appropriated Western ideals of moral autonomy while reframing them as service to the Japanese nation.⁹⁶

Kishida Toshiko's lectures in the early 1880s represented one of the first explicit articulations of women's political consciousness in modern Japan. Her 1883 speech, "Daughters in Boxes" (*Hakoiri musume no setsu*), condemned the social confinement of women and demanded intellectual equality.⁹⁷ Kishida's activism aligned with the Freedom and People's Rights Movement (*Jiyū Minken Undō*), which sought constitutional reform and civic participation. Yet, her call for women's involvement in politics provoked state backlash; she was arrested in 1884 under the Peace Preservation Law, which prohibited women from attending or speaking at political meetings.⁹⁸ This event underscores the paradox of Meiji liberalism: the state promoted modern education yet restricted political freedom, especially for women.

The Christian feminist movement thus embodied a transnational modernity that was both liberatory and nationalistic. Christian women invoked Western moral discourse to argue that Japan's strength depended on the moral elevation of its women. As Ellen Gardner Nakamura confirms, Christianity allowed women to articulate public morality without directly confronting the political order, by moralizing rather than politicizing their claims, activists secured a measure

⁹⁵ Sievers, *Flowers in Salt*, 44–48.

⁹⁶ Molony, "Women's Rights," 641.

⁹⁷ Kishida Toshiko, "Hakoiri musume no setsu" [The Daughters in Boxes], 1883, in *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, vol. 2, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); 274–76.

⁹⁸ Sievers, *Flowers in Salt*, 53.

of legitimacy within the patriarchal public sphere.⁹⁹ Yet, this strategy carried limitations. Many Christian feminists reinforced the "good wife, wise mother" ideal by emphasizing women's moral duty rather than their political rights.¹⁰⁰ The tension between moral authority and civic agency persisted into the early twentieth century, when a new generation of secular feminists would challenge these boundaries more directly.

The Bluestocking Society and the Politics of Female Individuality

The founding of the Seitō (Bluestocking) Society in 1911 marked a new phase of feminist expression in Japan. Led by Raichō Hiratsuka, *Seitō* redefined womanhood through art, literature, and self-realization rather than moral duty. Its inaugural manifesto declared: "In the beginning, woman was the sun. She was an authentic being. Now she is the moon, living by others' light."¹⁰¹ This imagery captured the frustration of educated women who had inherited the fruits of modernization yet remained bound by patriarchal law. Unlike the Christian feminists of the 1880s, the Seitō women embraced individuality and sexual autonomy as central to female liberation. Writers such as Akiko Yosano, Itō Noe, and Hasegawa Shigure challenged the notion that women's virtue lay in chastity and obedience.¹⁰² Their essays and fiction were inspired by European feminist thought, including Ellen Key's theories of motherhood and Henrik Ibsen's dramas of individual freedom.¹⁰³ By linking personal experience to structural inequality, *Seitō* pioneered Japan's first feminist critique of both capitalism and patriarchy.

⁹⁹ Ellen Gardner Nakamura. *Japanese Medical Lives in Transformation: Contesting Modernity in the Late Nineteenth Century*. (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London, 2025), 21.

¹⁰⁰ Koyama, *Ryōsai Kenbo*, 83–86.

¹⁰¹ Hiratsuka, Raichō. *In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun: The Autobiography of a Japanese Feminist*. Translated by Teruko Craig. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 219.

¹⁰² Akiko, *Midaregami*.

¹⁰³ Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 58.

The *Seitō* movement, however, faced severe censorship. The Home Ministry banned several issues of *Seitō* for “corrupting public morals,” citing essays that discussed free love, birth control, and women’s bodies.¹⁰⁴ In 1916, *Seitō* dissolved amid state repression and internal ideological conflict. Yet its legacy endured, inspiring socialist and anarchist feminists who would emerge during the Taishō period. Historians have interpreted *Seitō* as Japan’s entry into “modern feminism,” a discourse centered on the individual rather than the family or nation.¹⁰⁵ Rebecca Jennison argues that *Seitō* transformed literature into “a form of political resistance through self-narration.”¹⁰⁶ In contrast, Miriam Silverberg emphasizes the group’s radicalism, calling it a rebellion not only against men, but against the moral order of Meiji modernity itself.¹⁰⁷ Both interpretations illuminate *Seitō*’s central paradox: it thrived within the framework created by the modern nation-state yet sought to transcend them through personal freedom and artistic expression.

The Taishō Era: Liberalism, Suffrage, and Socialist Feminism (1912–1926)

The death of Emperor Meiji in 1912 ushered in the **Taishō era**, a period of relative liberalization and social ferment. The expansion of education, urban labor, and print culture fostered unprecedented activism among women.¹⁰⁸ Groups like the New Women’s Association (Shin Fujin Kyōkai), founded in 1919 by Ichikawa Fusae and Raichō Hiratsuka, advocated

¹⁰⁴ Sievers, *Flowers in Salt*, 228.

¹⁰⁵ Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 62.

¹⁰⁶ Rebecca Jennison, “Revelations from the Sea”: An Artist's Response to the Disasters of March 11th, 2011.” *Asia-Pacific Journal*, 10, 201208. (2012); 347-49.

¹⁰⁷ Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 41.

¹⁰⁸ Sievers, *Flowers in Salt*, 239.

women's suffrage and legal reforms to protect mothers and workers.¹⁰⁹ Ichikawa's journal *Fujin Kōron* (*Women's Review*) became a forum for debate over citizenship, morality, and economic justice. In 1920, the Association petitioned the Diet to amend Article 5 of the Public Peace Police Law, which barred women from joining political organizations.¹¹⁰ Though unsuccessful, the campaign fueled public discourse. It linked Japanese feminism to international suffrage movements.

Ichikawa later represented Japan at the International Woman Suffrage Alliance in Geneva in 1923, signaling Japan's integration into the global feminist network.¹¹¹

At the same time, socialist and anarchist feminists, including Itō Noe and Kanno Suga, critiqued capitalism and the state's use of women's labor.¹¹² Itō, editor of the anarchist journal *Seitō* after 1915, linked women's oppression to class exploitation, arguing that "freedom for women cannot exist under capitalism."¹¹³ Her execution in 1923 following the Great Kantō Earthquake repression (the *Amakasu Incident*) symbolized the violent limits of dissent in Taishō Japan.¹¹⁴ Thus, the Taishō period represented both progress and repression. While middle-class feminists gained visibility through suffrage campaigns, radical activists faced persecution. Vera Mackie identifies this as "a bifurcation of feminism": one path seeking reform within the state, the other

¹⁰⁹ Ichikawa Fusae, *Watashi no Rirekisho* (*My Career*, Tokyo: Mainichi Shinbunsha, 1971), 61–63.

¹¹⁰ Barbara Molony, "Equality versus Difference: The Japanese Debate over 'Motherhood Protection,' 1915–1950," *Feminist Studies* 12, no. 1 (1986): 86–88.

¹¹¹ Mackie, *Creating Socialist Women*, 112.

¹¹² Patricia Morley, *The Mountain Is Moving: Japanese Women's Lives* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999), 97–99.

¹¹³ Itō Noe, "The Path of Freedom," *Seitō* (1915), translated in *Modern Japanese Literature: From Meiji to the Present*, ed. Donald Keene (New York: Grove, 1956); 214.

¹¹⁴ Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths*, 282.

seeking liberation beyond it.¹¹⁵ Both trajectories, however, laid out the groundwork for post-war women's movements that would eventually secure suffrage in 1945.

The Taishō Era and the Politics of Modern Citizenship (1912–1926)

The Taishō era (1912–1926) marked a pivotal turning point in the evolution of Japanese women's activism. This period saw a gradual shift from moral and educational reform toward explicit political advocacy, shaped by the broader discourse of "Taishō Democracy." The new liberal climate encouraged citizens to participate in public debate and activism, yet women's inclusion in this vision of modern citizenship remained contested. Women's movements during this era reflected a transformation from domestic to civic values. Activists such as Raichō Hiratsuka and Ichikawa Fusae redefined womanhood in terms of public service and citizenship rather than in terms of family roles.¹¹⁶ The founding of the New Women's Association (Shin Fujin Kyōkai) in 1919 epitomized this change. The group's campaign to repeal Article 5 of the Public Peace Police Law, which forbade women from joining political associations, was revolutionary not only for its legal implications but also for its redefinition of what it meant to be a "moral" woman.¹¹⁷

In their petitions to the Diet, Hiratsuka and Ichikawa invoked national strength and moral purity as reasons women must be allowed civic participation, championing the ideal that if the nation expects loyalty and virtue from women, it must grant them the rights that correspond to those virtues.¹¹⁸ This rhetorical strategy exemplifies the central paradox of Japanese feminism,

¹¹⁵ Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*.

¹¹⁶ Sievers, *Flowers in Salt*, 237.

¹¹⁷ Molony, "Equality versus Difference," 86.

¹¹⁸ Raichō Hiratsuka, "Petition to the Diet for the Revision of Article 5," *Shin Fujin Kyōkai Archives*, Tokyo, 1919.

that women advanced their cause by appealing to the same nationalist discourse that had historically restricted them. Beyond suffrage, Taishō-era feminists broadened their activism to include labor rights, maternity protection, and the moral regulation of prostitution. The “Motherhood Protection Debate” (Bosei Hogo Ronsō) of 1918–1921, which pitted Yosano Akiko against socialist feminist Yamakawa Kikue, revealed tensions within the movement.¹¹⁹ While Yosano emphasized maternal self-reliance as a form of civic virtue, Yamakawa argued that motherhood could not be protected under capitalism and demanded state intervention.¹²⁰ This debate reflected a deeper ideological divide between liberal feminism, which sought gradual reform within the nation-state, and socialist feminism, which critiqued the economic and patriarchal foundations of modern Japan.¹²¹

Moreover, women’s participation in labor activism, particularly in the textile industry, introduced class as a crucial dimension of gender politics. The 1920 Osaka Spinners’ Strike, led by female workers demanding better conditions, challenged both corporate capitalism and gender hierarchy.¹²² Feminists such as Kanno Suga and Itō Noe tied women’s liberation to a broader critique of the capitalist state, emphasizing that “without economic freedom, women’s emancipation is impossible.”¹²³ Yet despite their differences, both liberal and socialist feminists framed their activism as a patriotic duty rather than a rebellion against Japan, but as a moral fulfillment.

¹¹⁹ Molony, “Equality versus Difference,” 89.

¹²⁰ Yamakawa Kikue, “Motherhood and the State,” *Fujin Kōron* (Tokyo, 1920).

¹²¹ Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 81–82.

¹²² Hunter, “Women and Work in the Meiji Period,” 165.

¹²³ Noe, “The Path of Freedom,” 215.

The need to define those movements reveals the enduring thread of nationalism in Japanese feminism: women claimed rights in the name of improving the nation, not undermining it. The rhetoric of service, sacrifice, and civilization continued to bind feminism to the state's moral project. By the early 1920s, women's activism had achieved significant visibility, even as it faced criticism. The Tokyo Women's Reform Society, the Women's Suffrage League, and the Women's Labor Federation formed networks that linked gender equality to democracy. These movements culminated in the postwar suffrage victory of 1945. Still, their intellectual and moral roots were firmly established in the Taishō years, when women first asserted that to serve the nation truly, they must also be citizens of it.

The Paradox of Progress: Reform, Citizenship, and the Limits of Female Agency

The modernization of Meiji Japan was, in many ways, a national project disguised as a social revolution. While women's education and participation in civic life expanded, these reforms were not rooted in egalitarian ideals but in the logic of national survival. As Japan sought to prove itself equal to Western powers after the Meiji Restoration, women's status became a visible symbol of Japan's "civilization and enlightenment" (*bunmei kaika*). Yet, this rhetoric of progress was inherently contradictory: women were both uplifted and constrained, granted symbolic citizenship but denied meaningful political or social power. The Meiji state's education reforms reveal the gendered nature of meaningful modernization.

The 1872 Gakusei (Education Order) established a national school system that included girls, thereby expanding educational access in unprecedented ways. However, the purpose of female education was explicitly national and moral rather than intellectual or political. As historian Barbara Molony observes, "the state envisioned educated women not as autonomous

individuals but as disciplined mothers who could raise enlightened citizens.”¹²⁴ Education for women thus became an instrument of the state, a means of shaping loyal, domestically oriented subjects rather than cultivating independent thinkers.

This paradox was further complicated by the “Good Wife, Wise Mother” (ryōsai kenbo) ideology, which became the moral backbone of Meiji gender politics. The state’s promotion of ryōsai kenbo was not a concession to women’s liberation but a containment strategy that co-opted women’s potential into the service of national goals. As Sabine Frühstück and Anne Walther Hall argue, “Meiji reformers framed womanhood as a moral reservoir for the nation, not as a site of political transformation.”¹²⁵ This moral nationalism, while elevating the social respectability of women, simultaneously reinforced patriarchal hierarchies by prescribing their roles within the home.

Female activists, such as Kishida Toshiko and Fukuda Hideko, were among the first to expose the contradictions between the state’s rhetoric of modernity and its patriarchal realities. Kishida’s famous 1883 speech, “*Daughters in Boxes*” (*Hakoiri musume*), critiqued the metaphorical confinement of women under Meiji modernization: Men talk of civilization, but the boxes remain, different, perhaps, but still boxes.¹²⁶ Her activism highlighted the extent to which women’s social roles were redefined without being liberated. The government’s response was swift and repressive; public speaking by women was banned under the 1889 Police Security Regulations.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Molony, “Women’s Rights,” 642.

¹²⁵ Frühstück and Walther Hall, *Recreating Japanese Women*, 91.

¹²⁶ Toshiko, “Daughters in Boxes,” 148.

¹²⁷ Marnie S. Anderson, *A Place in Public: Women’s Rights in Meiji Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2010), 45

Thus, even as women's activism emerged, it was shaped and circumscribed by the nationalist discourse of modern citizenship. The 1889 Meiji Constitution granted women some legal rights but formally barred them from public and political involvement. According to Vera Mackie, this exclusion illustrated that the modern Japanese nation-state was built upon gendered citizenship, where women were integral to the family system but peripheral to the polity.¹²⁸ In short, Japan's modernization between 1870 and 1920 exemplifies how feminist enterprises were both fostered and constrained by nationalism. Reformers like Kishida and Fukuda recognized that women's liberation could not be achieved within a framework that defined them as instruments of national strength. Their activism was radical, not because it opposed modernization, but because it exposed its hypocrisy. By redefining women's roles through state paternalism, Meiji Japan enacted what Chizuko Ueno later called a "patriarchal bargain of modernity," a trade-off in which women's symbolic participation in the nation replaced genuine emancipation.¹²⁹

The Politics of Feminist Memory and Legacy (1920–1930)

By the 1920s, Japan's rapid modernization and imperial expansion had generated both unprecedented opportunities and new constraints for women. The Taishō period (1912–1926), often remembered as an era of liberal reform and cultural experimentation, also witnessed the emergence of Japan's first explicitly feminist organizations. Yet, these movements, though bold in rhetoric, were still haunted by the legacy of Meiji-era nationalism. The activists who sought to redefine womanhood in the 1920s inherited not only the language of enlightenment and civilization (*bunmei kaika*) but also its gendered hierarchies.

¹²⁸ Mackie, *Creating Socialist Women in Japan*, 21.

¹²⁹ Chizuko Ueno, *The Modern Family in Japan: Its Rise and Fall* (Melbourne: Transpacific Press, 2009), 34.

The most famous of these groups was the Seitōsha (Bluestocking Society), founded in 1911 by Raichō Hiratsuka and other women intellectuals. The publication of their magazine *Seitō* (*Bluestocking*) marked a radical departure from the moral domesticity of the Meiji "Good Wife, Wise Mother" ideal. In its inaugural issue, Hiratsuka declared, "In the beginning, woman was the sun, an authentic person. Now she is the moon, dependent upon another to shine."¹³⁰ Her invocation of the sun, both a spiritual and national symbol, reimagined Japanese womanhood as an autonomous moral force rather than a reflection of men's desires. However, even this powerful metaphor was embedded in nationalist imagery; the "sun" was the emblem of Japan itself, suggesting that women's liberation remained inseparable from their service to the nation.

This paradox, of resistance within a nationalist framework, defined the Taishō feminist imagination. While the *Seitōsha* critiqued patriarchal double standards and the commodification of women, it rarely questioned the broader imperialist and capitalist structures that underpinned Meiji modernization. Vera Mackie notes that The Bluestockings demanded individual freedom, but the cultural logic of the nation still shaped their discourse.¹³¹ Their advocacy for women's sexual and intellectual autonomy was revolutionary in form but not always in substance; the movement's articulation of modern womanhood was, in part, an effort to demonstrate Japan's cultural modernity to Western observers. Indeed, the *Seitōsha's* very visibility was tolerated, and even encouraged by some intellectual men, because it symbolized Japan's arrival on the global stage as a modern, enlightened society.¹³² As historian Marnie Anderson observes, "The state could afford to allow limited expressions of feminism, provided that such movements did not

¹³⁰ Hiratsuka, "In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun," 97.

¹³¹ Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 43.

¹³² Sharon H. Nolte, "Women's Rights and Society's Needs: Japan's 1931 Suffrage Bill," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32, no. 2 (1990): 310.

threaten the imperial order."¹³³ It wasn't until the *Seitōsha* began discussing birth control and prostitution, however, that its members faced censorship and police surveillance, a stark reminder of the boundaries of permissible activism in imperial Japan.

At the same time, a new generation of socialist feminists, such as Yamakawa Kikue and Itō Noe, emerged to challenge the limitations of both the liberal feminist and state-sanctioned moral frameworks. Yamakawa argued that the *Seitōsha's* focus on self-cultivation ignored the material realities of working-class women, asserting that the true liberation of women requires the destruction of the class system itself.¹³⁴ Her critique marked a significant shift: Feminism was no longer merely a moral or cultural project, but a political struggle embedded in labor and class relations. Yet even socialist feminism could not escape the gravitational pull of nationalism; these activists, too, had to negotiate their space within a society that viewed political dissent as treasonous and unpatriotic.

By the late 1920s, the feminist movement had fractured under the combined pressures of state repression, ideological division, and imperial expansion. The Peace Preservation Law of 1925, which criminalized any attempt to alter the national polity (*kokutai*), effectively silenced radical feminists.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, the debates of this period reveal that women's activism in Japan was not a linear march toward liberation but an ongoing negotiation between national identity, modernity, and gendered citizenship. The legacy of early feminist movements thus lies not in their immediate success but in their redefinition of what it meant to be both "modern" and "Japanese."

¹³³ Anderson, *A Place in Public*, 102.

¹³⁴ Yamakawa Kikue, "The Changing Position of Women," in *Women and Class in Japanese History*, ed. Hitomi Tonomura and Anne Walthall (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, 1999); 305.

¹³⁵ Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 167.

As historian Sharon Nolte argues, "Japanese women's activism between 1870 and 1930 reflected the tensions of a society attempting to modernize without democratizing."¹³⁶ Feminism was tolerated by Japan if it could be reconciled with the nation's image of progress, but once it challenged the foundations of power, it was deemed seditious. Ultimately, the history of Japanese women's activism in this era is a story of unfinished liberation, in which reform served both as empowerment and containment. The activists of the 1920s inherited the contradictions of the Meiji period: they sought freedom through the language of national progress, only to discover that the nation itself was the greatest obstacle to emancipation. Their struggle reminds us that modernization and liberation are not synonymous with that a nation's advancement may come at the expense of those who symbolize its modernity.

Conclusion

The story of Japanese women's activism between 1870 and 1930 is one of ambition, oppression, and contradiction. From the early Meiji reformers who embraced *bunmei kaika* to the Bluestockings and socialist feminists of the Taishō era, Japanese women carved out new intellectual, educational, and political spaces. Yet, at every stage, their reformist energy was filtered through the prism of national ideology. The state's modernization project relied on women's transformation, not as autonomous subjects, but as symbolic vessels of Japan's moral and civilizational progress. At the heart of this history lies a persistent paradox: the modernization of womanhood was indispensable to Japan's emergence as a modern state, yet women themselves remained politically disenfranchised. The Meiji government's rhetoric of progress, exemplified by its education reforms and the *ryōsai kenbo* ideal, presented gender reform as a patriotic duty rather than a human right. Even those who challenged the system, like

¹³⁶ Nolte, "Women's Rights and Society's Needs," 312.

Kishida Toshiko and Fukuda Hideko, framed their activism in terms of moral and national improvement. As one Meiji reformer remarked, “The woman’s enlightenment is the nation’s enlightenment.”¹³⁷ The nation, not the individual, remained the ultimate horizon of female advancement.

By the Taishō period, activists such as Raichō Hiratsuka, Yamakawa Kikue, and Itō Noe had inherited both the intellectual tools and ideological traps of their Meiji predecessors. Their calls for women’s autonomy, whether expressed through *Seitō*’s literary rebellion or socialist critiques of labor inequality, sought liberation within a language that remained deeply nationalist. The sun imagery in Hiratsuka’s famous declaration, “In the beginning, woman was the sun,” captured this tension perfectly: the woman as the radiant symbol of Japan’s spiritual strength, not as an independent political being.¹³⁸ This integration between feminism and nationalism was not unique to Japan; it reflected broader patterns across East Asia. In Korea and China, women’s reforms during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also emerged as tools of national revitalization, catalyzed by imperial threats and cultural self-scrutiny.¹³⁹ Yet, Japan’s case was distinct in its success, and the danger of using modernization to mask patriarchy with progress.

The Meiji and Taishō eras demonstrated how a state could appear enlightened by educating women, while ensuring that their education reinforced obedience and service. From an intellectual standpoint, Japanese women’s activism illuminates the complex genealogy of modern feminism in East Asia. It was not born purely from Western liberal ideals, nor was it a spontaneous awakening of self-consciousness. Instead, it was the product of dynamic exchanges

¹³⁷ Nolte and Hastings, “The Meiji State’s Policy Toward Women,” 155.

¹³⁸ Hiratsuka, “In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun,” 97.

¹³⁹ Kim, “Under the Mandate of Nationalism,” 120-136.

between indigenous reformers, imperial politics, and transnational encounters.¹⁴⁰ The tension between empowerment and containment reveals the limits of what might be called state feminism; reforms granted from above that modernized women's roles without dismantling patriarchal structures.

This historical synthesis also challenges modern assumptions about linear progress. The Japanese women who fought for equality did so within a cultural and political system that continually redefined liberation in the service of the nation. Their activism, sometimes radical, sometimes restrained, underscores that modernization does not guarantee emancipation. Japanese feminists were not passive victims of state authority or simple borrowers of Western feminist ideas. Rather, they operated as strategic actors who negotiated the paradoxes of an age in which the rhetoric of progress simultaneously enabled and limited their activism. Ultimately, to study women's activism in Japan from 1870 to 1920 is to confront a broader question that echoes across modern history: can a nation truly modernize while maintaining traditional gender hierarchies? The answer, as these women's experiences reveal, is conditional. Nationalism gave women a platform, but it also defined the limits of their speech. Feminism flourished, but always under the shadow of the nation. In this sense, Japan's modern history is not a story of women's liberation achieved, but of liberation deferred, a struggle perpetually caught between the imperatives of progress and the persistence of patriarchy.

¹⁴⁰ Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 6.

Chapter Two: Nation Before Gender: Women's Reform and Modern Citizenship in Late Qing and Early Republican China

The final decades of the Qing dynasty were marked by collapse and redefinition: a crumbling imperial order, expanding Western and Japanese imperial influence, and internal reckonings over what it meant to be Chinese in a rapidly modernizing world. Between 1870 and 1920, a new language of reform emerged that linked national survival to social reconstruction and, earnestly, to the transformation of women's lives. Yet, as Chinese reformers sought to modernize their nation, the question of women's emancipation was often subordinated to the imperatives of state-building. Feminism, in other words, was nationalized before it was ever fully ascertained. As in Japan's Meiji reforms or Korea's late Joseon modernization campaigns, Chinese reformers reimagined gender not as an independent social category but as a marker of civilization.

The "modern woman" became a metaphor for China's progress or lack thereof in the eyes of the world. Educated men such as Liang Qichao, Kang Youwei, and Jin Tianhe wrote extensively about the need to empower women, not necessarily for their own sake, but to strengthen the nation through moral and reproductive renewal. A nation's strength depends upon its mothers, Liang wrote in 1897, asserting that ignorant women produce ignorant sons.¹⁴¹ While such rhetoric superficially aligned with feminist aspirations, it was deeply instrumentalist: women's education, work, and moral reform were promoted as tools of modernization, not as rights of self-determination.

¹⁴¹ Liang, "On Women's Education," 3–5.

Against this backdrop, women like Qiu Jin, He-Yin Zhen, and Tang Qunying sought to reclaim the reform discourse from within. They recognized that a national crisis could be an opportunity not only for women to rebuild China but also to reimagine womanhood itself. Qiu Jin's execution in 1907, while tragic, became a symbolic inversion of traditional female virtue: instead of dying for filial piety or chastity, she died for political certainties. Her martyrdom exemplified what Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl, and Dorothy Ko describe as a transnational feminism in translation, wherein Chinese women modified global feminist ideas through their own experiences of empire, nationalism, and cultural survival.¹⁴²

This "translation" of feminist consciousness was not merely linguistic but ideological. Chinese women reformers read Western and Japanese texts on women's rights, moral education, and citizenship, but they also critiqued the colonial implications of these texts. He-Yin Zhen argued that the discourse of "civilizing" women replicated the same hierarchies of sovereignty that characterized imperialism itself.¹⁴³ For He-Yin, liberation required a double revolution, against both patriarchal institution and capitalist exploitation, anticipating later Marxist feminist thought but rejecting its statist co-optation.

Thus, women's reform in late Qing and early Republican China occupied a paradoxical position: it was both central to modern nation-building and ostracized by it. As historian Wang Zheng observes, Chinese feminism was systematically "appropriated and erased" by later Communist narratives that framed women's emancipation as a gift from the state rather than an outcome of women's autonomous struggle.¹⁴⁴ The challenge for historians, then, is to recapture

¹⁴² Lydia H. Liu, Rebecca E. Karl, and Dorothy Ko, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 2–3.

¹⁴³ He-Yin Zhen, "On Women's Labor," in Liu, Karl, and Ko, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism*, 87–94.

¹⁴⁴ Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 12.

these earlier voices not as precursors to socialism but as intellectual and political agents in their own right.

At the turn of the twentieth century, this tension between nation and gender reform played out in schools, newspapers, and revolutionary organizations. Women's journals such as *Nüxuebao* ("Women's Education Journal") and *Tianyi bao* ("Natural Justice") became platforms for debating whether women's liberation should precede, follow, or coincide with national revolution. In the introduction paragraph to one 1907 issue, He-Yin Zhen wrote: To rectify the wrongs, we must first abolish the rule of men and introduce equality among human beings ... the goal of equality cannot be achieved except through women's liberation." Such challenges redefine revolution not only as a political act but as an existential one, the rebellion of consciousness itself. This feminist awakening of the late Qing period thus cannot be understood apart from the global flows of modernity. Just as Indian and Egyptian feminists struggled to articulate rights within an anti-colonial structure, Chinese women confronted the dilemma of how to modernize without Westernizing. Their efforts to "break the lotus," to unbind bodies, minds, and futures, were inseparable from broader efforts to define China as a modern nation in a world that equated progress with masculinity, science, and empire.

Education, Empire, and the Making of the Modern Chinese Woman

Education became the most visible battleground upon which the struggle over modern womanhood unfolded in late Qing and early Republican China. Reformers, missionaries, and activists alike understood schooling not only as a means of literacy or technical skill but as the moral foundation of a new national identity. The female body, once confined to the inner quarters of the family, was to be remade as a public figure through study, discipline, and civic virtue. Yet beneath this rhetoric of progress lay competing visions of what education should

accomplish: should women be taught to serve the nation as “good wives and wise mothers,” or to challenge the very hierarchies that defined the modern state?

The Late Qing Educational Reforms and the Politics of Civilization

In the wake of China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), reformers looked to Japan as a model of rapid modernization. The Meiji government’s success in building a literate, disciplined populace inspired Chinese intellectuals to link women’s education directly to national strength. Liang Qichao’s 1897 essay, *On Women’s Education*, argued that the intelligence of the mother determines the virtue of the nation.¹⁴⁵ He urged the establishment of girls’ schools to cultivate patriotism, moral conduct, and domestic management—an ideology later echoed in Japan’s “good wife, wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo*) ideal.

Yet, as Shizuko Koyama and Vera Mackie have noted in the Japanese context, the *ryōsai kenbo* model was never merely domestic.¹⁴⁶ It sought to produce women who could manage households as microcosms of the modern nation-state, where they became mothers of citizens rather than independent subjects. Similarly, in China, women’s education was imagined as a tool of civilization. Yukichi Fukuzawa’s dictum that “men and women are equal in their human capacity”¹⁴⁷ circulated widely among reformist journals, translated and debated by intellectuals like Liang and Jin Tianhe. But where Fukuzawa accentuated rational independence, Chinese reformers interpreted his ideas into moral nationalism. As one 1898 article in *Shiwubao* declared,

¹⁴⁵ Qichao, “On Women’s Education,” 3.

¹⁴⁶ Shizuko Koyama, *Ryōsai Kenbo: The Educational Ideal of ‘Good Wife, Wise Mother’ in Modern Japan* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 45; Vera Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan: Citizenship, Embodiment and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 58.

¹⁴⁷ Fukuzawa, *An Encouragement of Learning*, 1:4.

“A nation’s fall begins when its women are uneducated; its rise begins when its women learn to teach their sons loyalty and virtue.”¹⁴⁸

Such rhetoric masked buried uncertainties. Reformers insisted on women’s education but feared its emancipatory undertones. Schooling was designed less to foster equality than to preserve social order under the guise of modernization. As historian Joan Judge observes, “Educated women were to serve as symbols of reform rather than agents of it,”¹⁴⁹ the state’s involvement in founding girls’ schools in the early 1900s institutionalized this paradox. Textbooks praised loyalty, filial piety, and modesty even as they taught modern hygiene, geography, and arithmetic. The “new woman” was to be enlightened but obedient, a citizen of empire as much as of nation.

Missionary Schools and the Feminization of Moral Reform

If the state sought to control women through education, Christian missionaries pursued a parallel project of moral revival. From the 1870s onward, American and British women's missions established schools in treaty ports like Shanghai, Fuzhou, and Guangzhou, introducing Western curricula and notions of "proper womanhood." Missionary educators such as Mary Ninde Gamewell at Peking's Bridgman Academy promoted reading, science, and religious study as pathways to "true womanhood."¹⁵⁰ While missionary schools expanded educational access, they also took liberties with racialized and colonial hierarchies. Women's salvation was framed as liberation from an "Oriental" patriarchy. Yet, as Ellen Widmer and Rebecca Karl note, Chinese students often appropriated missionary education for their own purposes, using literacy

¹⁴⁸ “Women’s Education and the Nation’s Virtue,” *Shiwubao*, 1898, cited in Joan Judge, *The Precious Raft of History: The Past, the West, and the Woman Question in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); 56.

¹⁴⁹ Judge, *The Precious Raft of History*, 92.

¹⁵⁰ Mary Ninde Gamewell, *Missionary Education in Peking* (New York: Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society, 1904), 44.

and Christian networks to emulate secular visions of progress.¹⁵¹ Figures like Kang Aide (the daughter of reformer Kang Youwei) and Xie Bingying would later recall how these hybrid institutions shaped their sense of moral and civic expectations. The Christian attention on moral equality before God provided an ideological vocabulary through which early feminists could critique both Confucian patriarchy and Western imperial hypocrisy.

This intersection between religion and reform mirrored developments elsewhere in Asia. In both Korea and Japan, Christian women's societies helped construct the modern category of the "social woman," active in charity, education, and moral uplift. In China, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), founded in 1899, provided an organizational framework for female leadership long before the nationalist revolution.¹⁵² These networks allowed women to participate in public life without directly challenging male authority, thereby normalizing female visibility within the reformist public sphere.

Women's Schools as Sites of Political Consciousness

By the early 1900s, newly established women's schools in urban centers such as Shanghai and Beijing had become incubators of political radicalism. Students discussed social Darwinism, constitutionalism, and the rights of citizens, ideas inspired by Japanese and Western texts. Jin Tianhe's *Nüjie Zhong* (*The Women's Bell*, 1903) was especially influential, urging women to "If you desire to realize a women's revolution, you must begin with an economic revolution. What is an economic revolution? It is to overthrow the system of private property and to replace it with

¹⁵¹ Ellen Widmer, *The Beauty and the Book: Women and Fiction in Nineteenth-Century China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), 117; Rebecca E. Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 88.

¹⁵² "The Young Women's Christian Association in China," *Chinese Recorder*, 1900; 212–13.

communal property, meanwhile abandoning all [money] and currencies."¹⁵³ Though written by a man, the text circulated widely among female students and teachers, galvanizing into action an entire generation of activists.

Among them was Qiu Jin, who left her husband in 1904 to study in Japan, where she encountered not only Western feminism but also anarchism and nationalism. Her return to China marked a turning point: she founded the *Chinese Women's Journal* and a girls' school that doubled as a revolutionary training center. To educate a woman is to awaken a family, she wrote, "to educate many women is to awaken a nation."¹⁵⁴ Her assassination following a failed uprising in 1907 transformed her into a martyr of both gender and national liberation. The symbolic magnitude of women's education in this era cannot be overemphasized. Schools were not merely institutions but battlegrounds where competing modernities conflicted. The debates over whether girls should study science or moral improvement, participate in politics, or remain domestic mirrored the broader tensions of China's modernization: Westernization versus cultural preservation, reform versus revolution, patriarchy versus equality.

The Double Bind of Modern Citizenship

Despite the increase in schools and women's journals, women's education remained entangled in the contradictions of nationalism. Reformers celebrated the educated woman as an emblem of civilization but confined her within the limits of her family. As Susan Mann has argued, this tension produced a "republican motherhood" in China akin to that of post-

¹⁵³ Jin Tianhe, *The Women's Bell* (Nüjie Zhong, 1903), translated in Lydia H. Liu, Rebecca E. Karl, and Dorothy Ko, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 103.

¹⁵⁴ Qiu Jin, "On Women's Education," *Chinese Women's Journal*, 1905, in Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); 64.

revolutionary America, an ideology that permitted women symbolic power as mothers of citizens while denying them direct political freedoms.¹⁵⁵

By 1912, with the fall of the Qing and the rise of the Republic, women's education had become both an achievement and a decoy. Female literacy rates had risen, women teachers and journalists emerged in public life, and the rhetoric of equality circulated widely. Yet these improvements were uneven and fragile. The new republican state, like its imperial predecessor, saw women's enlightenment to an end: a modern nation built upon traditional gender hierarchies. The slogan "nation before gender" thus envelops both the progress and the paradox of China's feminist awakening.

Feminism and Revolution: Women in the 1911 Uprising and Beyond

The Xinhai Revolution of 1911 marked a turning point in Chinese history, toppling the Qing dynasty and establishing the Republic of China. What makes this revolution distinctive is that it is frequently narrated as a story of male heroes and nationalist triumph, even though women played indispensable roles both on and behind the front lines. Their activism challenged not only imperial authority but also the deeply entrenched patriarchal framework that had constricted them for centuries. From undercover revolutionary work to public advocacy, women forged new paths in the intertwined struggles for national liberation and gender equality.

The Tongmenghui and the Mobilization of Women

Founded in 1905 in Tokyo by Sun Yat-sen, the Tongmenghui (同盟会, Revolutionary Alliance) was primarily a male-led organization dedicated to overthrowing the Qing dynasty. Yet women were far from passive spectators; they served as couriers, propagandists, and fundraisers,

¹⁵⁵ Mann, *Precious Records*, 248.

and, in some cases, they trained in armed combat. Tang Qunying, one of the first women admitted to the Tongmenghui, exemplified the potential and possibilities of women's political engagement. She organized female units, coordinated covert operations, and later helped found the Women's Suffrage Alliance (妇女参政同盟会), advocating for women's participation in both national politics and social reform.¹⁵⁶

The Tongmenghui displays the duality of women's revolutionary work: while revolutionary ideology promised liberation from imperial rule, it did not automatically pledge itself to gender equality. As Wang Zheng notes, Women's participation in nationalist struggle often increased their visibility and influence but rarely translated into structural changes in gender relations.¹⁵⁷ Women's endeavors in smuggling weapons, fundraising, and distributing revolutionary literature were imperative to the success of uprisings, yet official histories frequently minimized or ignored their contributions.

Qiu Jin: Martyrdom and the Politics of Gender

Among the most iconic figures of this era was Qiu Jin (1875–1907). Her radical vision encompassed both national and gender liberation: she opposed footbinding and arranged marriage, advocated for women's education, and publicly critiqued patriarchal conventions. After leaving her husband and studying in Japan, Qiu Jin returned to China to lead revolutionary pursuits, including founding the *Chinese Women's Journal* and establishing a girls' school that doubled as a revolutionary training ground.¹⁵⁸ Her arrest and execution following a failed uprising in 1907 made her a symbol of feminist and nationalist struggle. Yet Qiu Jin's

¹⁵⁶ Tang Qunying, "Women in the Tongmenghui," in Lan and Fong, *Women in Republican China*; 44.

¹⁵⁷ Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 112.

¹⁵⁸ Jin, *Chinese Women's Journal*, 1905, in Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment*, 64.

martyrdom also unmask the tensions ingrained in women's activism. As Wang observes, "Qiu Jin's death dramatized the stakes of women's participation in revolution: to be a woman was to risk erasure or martyrdom in the service of national ideals."¹⁵⁹ While her sacrifice inspired future generations, it illuminated the dangers of challenging male-dominated revolutionary hierarchies and societal expectations.

He-Yin Zhen and the Radical Critique of Patriarchy

While Qiu Jin became a symbol of heroic sacrifice, He-Yin Zhen (active 1903–1920) gave voice to a more systematic critique of gendered oppression. Publishing in *Tianyi Bao* (Natural Justice), He-Yin Zhen contended that women's liberation could not be separated from broader struggles for social and economic justice. She argued that national modernization under male leadership often preserved gender hierarchies rather than dismantling them.¹⁶⁰ He-Yin Zhen's writings highlighted the intersection of class and gender, asserting that women's oppression was tied to both patriarchal structures and capitalist exploitation. For example, she challenged the belief that education should solely prepare women to be "good mothers and loyal wives," insisting instead on the right to complete political, economic, and sexual freedom.¹⁶¹ Her radical vision challenged both traditional Confucian ideals and the male-dominated nationalist developments taking place, expanding the theoretical boundaries of Chinese feminism beyond symbolic representation.

Women on the Revolutionary Frontlines

¹⁵⁹ Jin, *Chinese Women's Journal*, 64.

¹⁶⁰ He-Yin Zhen, *Tianyi Bao (Natural Justice)*, ed. Lydia H. Liu et al., *The Birth of Chinese Feminism*, 139.

¹⁶¹ Zhen, *Tianyi Bao*, p 141.

Beyond intellectual and journalistic contributions, women also engaged directly in revolutionary activity. Within secret societies and revolutionary networks, women acted as spies, messengers, and even combatants. Their participation was not insignificant; it was critical to the operational success of anti-Qing uprisings. While official records often relegated these contributions to footnotes, eyewitness accounts and local records reveal that women actively organized, fundraised, and coordinated insurgencies.¹⁶² The 1911 revolution showcases the complex interplay between nationalism and feminism: women were mobilized for the nationalist cause, yet their post-revolutionary status remained precarious. The new Republic granted limited suffrage rights and educational opportunities, but social and legal reforms regularly fell short of challenging entrenched patriarchal conventions. Revolutionary activism thus became both a vehicle for gendered visibility and a reminder of the structural limitations imposed on women in the public sphere.

The Post-Revolutionary Landscape and Women's Organizing

Following the 1911 revolution, women continued to seek opportunities for political participation and social reform. Organizations such as the Women's Suffrage Alliance and the Women's Education Association appeared in urban centers, advocating for voting rights, access to education, and legal reforms concerning marriage and property.¹⁶³ These endeavors reflected both the influence of earlier activists like Qiu Jin and the ongoing strain between national imperatives and gendered emancipation. Despite these achievements, the republican period was marked by a paradox: women's increased visibility in public life coincided with incessant legal and social inequality.

¹⁶² Gail Hershatter, *Women and China's Revolutions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 56.

¹⁶³ "Women's Suffrage Alliance," *Beijing Daily*, 1912, cited in Lan and Fong, *Women in Republican China*; 88.

As historian Gail Hershatter observes, "Workers become most visible in the historical record at moments of collective action. But just as scholars of the labor movement more generally have discovered a mixed history of militancy and quietism, conflicting political loyalties, alliances with management, defensive or conservative organizing goals, and nonlinear activity of various sorts, so too with women's participation in collective action."¹⁶⁴ Rural and working-class women, who comprised most of the population, faced even more limited avenues for participation, constrained by poverty, labor demands, and local patriarchal authority. The post-revolutionary moment thus reveals both the potential and the limits of early twentieth-century Chinese feminism: activism expanded the horizons of possibility, yet structural change remained incomplete.

International Influences and Transnational Feminism

The activism of Chinese women during this period was not isolated from global influence. Exposure to Japanese, Western, and Christian feminist thought shaped strategies, rhetoric, and institutional development. Missionary-educated women, such as Kang Aide and Qiu Jin, embraced concepts surrounding female education, moral autonomy, and civic responsibility in their activism, blending local and transnational discourses.¹⁶⁵ Publications like *Chinese Women's Journal* disseminated these ideas widely, fostering networks that connected urban, educated women across provincial and international boundaries.

However, transnational influence was double-edged. While it provided ideological and organizational tools, it also introduced hierarchies of power and representation, particularly when

¹⁶⁴ Gail Hershatter, "State of the Field: Women in China's Long Twentieth Century," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63, no. 4 (2004): 1018.

¹⁶⁵ Widmer, *The Beauty and the Book*, 117.

Western observers, such as Alicia Archibald, depicted Chinese women as passive victims.¹⁶⁶ Chinese feminists were markedly aware of these dynamics, seeking to assert agency while engaging selectively with international models. Their work demonstrates the capacity of early twentieth-century women to navigate, adapt, and resist external frameworks while advancing indigenous visions of emancipation.

Print Culture and the Rise of Feminist Journalism

The transformation of China's public sphere in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was inseparable from the growth of print culture. As the empire confronted imperial decline and Western intrusion, intellectual reformers recognized that modernity required not only new institutions but new forms of discourse. Women's voices, long prohibited from political and literary pursuits, began to enter this space through journalism and essays, especially during the reform movements of the 1890s and the early Republic. Periodicals such as *Nübao* (Women's Journal, 1898), *Funü Shibao* (The Women's Eastern Times, 1911–1917), and *Nüxuebao* (Women's Education Journal, 1898) became instruments for representing female subjectivity and national citizenship.¹⁶⁷

These publications connected the emancipation of women to the moral regeneration of the nation, arguing that the strength of China's "sons" depended upon the education of its "daughters." This radical reorientation of gender rhetoric owed much to the intellectual backdrop shaped by reformers like Liang Qichao and Jin Tianhe. Liang's essays in the *Qingyi Bao* (Journal of Public Opinion) called for the education of women as "the foundation of enlightened citizens." At the same time, Jin Tianhe's *Nüjie Zhong* (The Women's Bell, 1903) provided one

¹⁶⁶ Alicia Archibald, *In the Land of the Blue Gown* (London: Macmillan, 1909), 54.

¹⁶⁷ Judge, *Republican*, 24–27.

of the earliest feminist manifestos in modern Chinese literature.¹⁶⁸ Jin's preface mourned that China had "half its population bound in ignorance" and warned that "without the awakening of women, the nation's soul will remain asleep."¹⁶⁹ This metaphor of awakening became a central trope of feminist writing in this period, signaling both the moral revival of the people and the birth of a new female consciousness.

Female journalists and writers appropriated this language of national salvation to claim a moral voice in reformist culture. Individuals such as *Qiu Jin*, *Chen Xiefen*, and *He-Yin Zhen* transformed the press into a political weapon. Qiu Jin's 1907 essay "An Address to Two Hundred Million Fellow Countrywomen" declared that women must "cast off the chains of household bondage and act as citizens of the nation."¹⁷⁰ Writing in the radical journal *Zhongguo Nübao* (Chinese Women's Journal), Qiu fused feminism with republican nationalism, placing women's liberation within a broader anti-Manchu and anti-imperialist framework.¹⁷¹ Her journalism drew upon the revolutionary rhetoric of the late Qing reformers but supplanted its patriarchal conjectures by asserting women's moral and intellectual equality.

Meanwhile, *Chen Xiefen*, the daughter of reformist editor Chen Fan, edited *Nübao* and used its pages to publish essays on female education and self-development. In one issue, she argued that without women's awakening, reform would be like a building without a

¹⁶⁸ Tianhe, *Nüjie Zhong* [The Women's Bell], Preface.

¹⁶⁹ Tianhe, *Nüjie Zhong* [The Women's Bell], 2.

¹⁷⁰ Jin Qiu, "An Address to Two Hundred Million Fellow Countrywomen," in *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, ed. Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl, and Dorothy Ko (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); 52.

¹⁷¹ Qiu, "An Address to Two Hundred Million Fellow Countrywomen," 55.

foundation.¹⁷² Chen's editorial vision softened the lines between reform and revolution, situating her publication at the intersection of the *New Citizen* (Xinmin) discourse and the emerging women's rights movement. *He-Yin Zhen* went even further. Writing for *Tianyi Bao* (Natural Justice) in 1907, she challenged both Confucian patriarchy and capitalist manipulation, asserting that the liberation of women cannot come through benevolent men but through women's own struggle.¹⁷³ Her essays, deeply informed by anarchist theory, offered a rare critique of the class and economic dimensions of gender oppression in modern Chinese belief.

The expansion of print culture also facilitated widespread female reading. Literary historian Joan Judge observes that periodicals for women were simultaneously pedagogical and performative; they taught women to read and to imagine themselves as citizens.¹⁷⁴ The serialized essays and letters printed in these journals created networks of communication across provinces, linking educated women in Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Beijing with teachers, students, and missionaries throughout the empire. These networks were not merely channels of reformist ideology; they became originators of modern identity, where the private sphere of female virtue merged with the public realm of civic involvement.

The early twentieth century thus witnessed a convergence of nationalist reform and feminist self-expression. Yet, as historian Lydia Liu notes, the language of "civilization" (*wenming*) that shaped reformist discourse also constrained it, translating women's liberation into a project of "civilizing the domestic sphere."¹⁷⁵ This ambivalence mirrored the experience of

¹⁷² Chen Xiefen, "On Women's Education," *Nübao*, 1898, cited in Tani Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); 66.

¹⁷³ Zhen, "On the Question of Women's Liberation," 89.

¹⁷⁴ Judge, *Republican Lens*, 30.

¹⁷⁵ Lydia Liu, "The Female Voice of Modernity," in *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); 211.

Meiji Japan, where the ideal of the “good wife, wise mother” transformed female education into a moral scheming of the state. In China, the tension between emancipation and discipline was particularly acute: women were mobilized to serve the nation, but their voices often remained confined within patriarchal boundaries.

Nevertheless, the proliferation of women’s journals signaled an irreversible shift. By the 1910s, female editors and activists used print media to claim their places in the public sphere. The *Funü Shibao*, edited by *Bao Tianxiao* and later *Zhang Mojun*, featured articles on suffrage, female education, and labor rights. In one 1912 editorial, Zhang argued that the citizen’s heart knows no gender; women too must bear the responsibilities of freedom.¹⁷⁶ This proclamation of the nature of citizenship through print marked a profound transformation in Chinese modernity: the nation’s moral regeneration could no longer exclude the voices of its women.

Education, Reform Societies, and the Struggle for Citizenship

The evolution of print culture and women’s journalism in late Qing China found its institutional counterpart in the rise of educational reform and women’s civic organizations during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1920, the discourse of female education evolved from a paternalistic concern with domestic virtue to a radical insistence on women’s equal participation in the public sphere. This shift paralleled the decline of imperial authority, the 1911 Revolution, and the social upheavals of the early Republic. Within these turbulent circumstances, women’s reform societies served as originators of modern citizenship, places in which education, activism, and personal growth converged to redefine what it meant to be both a woman and a Chinese citizen.

¹⁷⁶ Mojun Zhang, “On Women and Citizenship,” *Funü Shibao* 3, no. 1 (1912); 12.

Education reform was at the heart of this transformation. The late Qing government's 1907 *Regulations for Girls' Schools* marked the first official sanctioning of female education in China's history.¹⁷⁷ The regulations emphasized "moral training and practical skills," reflecting the state's attempt to produce loyal mothers and diligent homemakers. Yet, as historian Rebecca Karl notes, these schools became "incubators of feminist consciousness," where young women learned to recognize their personal development as national service.¹⁷⁸ Textbooks imported from Japan and missionary schools alike exposed female students to global feminist ideals, including Christian philanthropy, moral egalitarianism, and civic virtue.¹⁷⁹

Among the most influential reformers was *Jin Tianhe*, whose *Nüjie Zhong* (The Women's Bell) had called for universal education for women as early as 1903. His collaborator *Qiu Jin*, educated in Japan, manifested this integration of intellectual reform and revolutionary nationalism. Her short-lived *Datong School* for girls in Shaoxing became a hub of radical activism, where the study of literature and martial arts went hand in hand with lectures on patriotism and self-reliance.¹⁸⁰ Qiu's pedagogy drew upon the Japanese *shūshin* (moral training) model but redefined virtue as civic commitment rather than domestic obedience. Her famous truism, "women must learn before they can save the nation," captured the central paradox of late Qing feminism: the pursuit of education as both a personal right and a patriotic duty.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ *Regulations for Girls' Schools*, Imperial Ministry of Education, 1907, translated in F. E. A. Krause, *Educational Reform in Late Qing China* (London: Routledge, 2008), 134.

¹⁷⁸ Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 103.

¹⁷⁹ Liu, Karl, and Ko, eds., *The Birth of Chinese Feminism*, 77–80.

¹⁸⁰ Jin Qiu, "Autobiographical Fragments," in *The Birth of Chinese Feminism*; 61.

¹⁸¹ Jin, "Autobiographical Fragments," 62.

Following the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, women's associations multiplied across urban centers. The *Shanghai Women's Patriotic Association*, the *Nüxuehui* (Women's Education Society), and later the *Funü Qunzhonghui* (Women's Mass Organization) marshalled thousands of women through lectures, publications, and charity projects.¹⁸² As Vera Schwarcz argues, these associations transformed traditional forms of benevolence (*cishan*) into political activism, expanding the concept of public virtue (*gongde*) to include civic engagement.¹⁸³ This redefinition of moral identity drew upon a Confucian vocabulary of righteousness while adopting Western notions of citizenship and human rights.

The discourse within these organizations reveals the competing visions of women's place in the new Republic. For moderate reformers such as *Tang Qunying* and *Lin Zongsu*, education was a means toward political emancipation. Tang, who organized the *Nüzi Chanjihui* (Women's Suffrage Society) in 1912, argued that "citizenship without women is a nation without half its people."¹⁸⁴ Lin Zongsu went further, submitting a petition to the provisional parliament in Nanjing demanding voting rights and equal legal status for women.¹⁸⁵ Although the petition was rejected, it marked the first formal request for women's suffrage in Chinese political history.

Yet other activists questioned whether political rights could precede social and moral recasting. The anarchist feminist *He-Yin Zhen* criticized suffrage advocates for "imitating men's

¹⁸² Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese*, 72–75.

¹⁸³ Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 114.

¹⁸⁴ Tang Qunying, "Petition for Women's Suffrage," *Nüzi Chanjihui Records*, Nanjing; 1912.

¹⁸⁵ Lin Zongsu, "Letter to the Provisional Parliament," *Collected Works of Early Chinese Feminists*, ed. Liu Qinfeng (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1995); 21–23.

politics" while neglecting economic justice.¹⁸⁶ In her essay "On the Question of Women's Liberation," she warned that "education without equality in livelihood is another form of bondage."¹⁸⁷ He-Yin's critique introduced class analysis into Chinese feminist thought, linking the subjugation of women to broader systems of capitalist manipulation and imperial domination. Her perspective, though marginal at the time, foreshadowed later socialist feminism in the May Fourth era.

The early Republic thus became a contested terrain where competing models of womanhood: Confucian, liberal, and radical, vied for legitimacy. Periodicals such as *Funü Shibao* and *Nüzi Shijie* (Women's World) served as the ideological stage for these debates. One 1915 editorial in *Funü Shibao* declared that "the education of women is no longer for the family, but for the citizenry."¹⁸⁸ The publication's pages chronicled a developing field of activism: campaigns for girls' schooling, opposition to child marriage and foot-binding, and calls for women's entrance into teaching, medicine, and journalism.¹⁸⁹

By 1920, the outline of modern Chinese feminism had begun to solidify. The new urban woman (*xin nūxing*), celebrated in fiction, poetry, and the press, symbolized the convergence of education, labor, and civic identity. As historian Barbara Molony has argued in the Japanese context, the turn to citizenship discourse indicated a "gendered negotiation with modernity," in which the state's developmentalist goals intersected with women's aspirations for autonomy.¹⁹⁰ In

¹⁸⁶ He-Yin Zhen, "On Feminism and Class," *Tianyi Bao* (Tokyo, 1907), reprinted in *The Birth of Chinese Feminism*; 91.

¹⁸⁷ Zhen, "On Feminism and Class," 93.

¹⁸⁸ "On Women's Education and Citizenship," *Funü Shibao* 5, no. 2 (1915); 4.

¹⁸⁹ Judge, *Republican Lens*, 117–122.

¹⁹⁰ Molony, "Women's Rights," 639.

China, this negotiation remained unresolved, with education continuing to serve as both the instrument of national progress and the measure of women's moral worth. Yet the reformers of this period had irreversibly altered the intellectual landscape: they had made women's agency a necessary condition for imagining modernity itself.

From Moral Virtue to Modern Citizenship: The May Fourth Feminist Horizon

By the mid-1910s, the intellectual and social momentum generated by women's education and reform societies began to intersect with a broader cultural upheaval: the *New Culture* and *May Fourth* movements. These movements, while often associated with literary innovation and anti-Confucian thought, also transformed the moral and political vocabulary of women's activism. The "woman question" (*nüzi wenti*), once framed in the recognition of moral virtue and family reform, was reimagined as a central difficulty of national modernity. As the scholar Joan Judge observes, the May Fourth woman stood at the crossroads of the old and the new, at once the measure of civilization and the embodiment of its contradictions.¹⁹¹

The *May Fourth Movement* of 1919 was sparked by student protests against imperialism and the Treaty of Versailles, but its most legacy lay in its radical humanism. Journals such as *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian*) and *The New Woman* (*Xin Nüxing*) communicated a vision of social transformation grounded in individual freedom, science, and democracy. For female intellectuals like *Ding Ling*, *Chen Hengzhe*, and *Lu Yin*, these ideals provided a new moral grammar for articulating gender emancipation. Chen Hengzhe's 1918 essay "Women's Education" argued that only when women are educated as individuals, not as mothers or wives, will civilization

¹⁹¹ Judge, *Republican Lens*, 219.

truly advance.¹⁹² This subtle shift from the instrumental to the intrinsic value of education marked a profound separation away from Confucian patriarchy and nationalist utilitarianism.

Yet, the relationship between women's liberation and national reform remained deeply entangled. The historian Lydia Liu has described this as the paradox of "translingual modernity": feminist discourse in China developed through the translation of Western liberal and socialist concepts such as "rights," "freedom," and "citizenship," but these concepts were introduced within a nationalist framework that continued to prioritize collective over individual liberation.¹⁹³ In other words, women's activism was still burdened with the expectation that its ultimate purpose was to serve the nation.

This paradox found a voice in the fiction and essays of *Lu Xun*, *Ding Ling*, and *Bing Xin*, who portrayed women as the emotional and ethical barometers of a faltering civilization. Ding Ling's short story *Miss Sophia's Diary* (1927) presents a female protagonist torn between self-discovery and social expectation, a microcosm of what Vera Schwarcz has called "the inner revolution" of May Fourth feminism.¹⁹⁴ Through the confessional form, Ding Ling translated the rhetoric of political freedom into a discourse of interior liberation. As she writes, "My freedom is not to be granted by others, it is to be discovered within myself."¹⁹⁵

Other writers used journalism and education as platforms for activism. *Chen Hengzhe*, the first woman to graduate from the University of Chicago and later a professor at Peking University, founded one of the earliest co-educational seminars on Western philosophy in

¹⁹² Chen Hengzhe, "Women's Education," *New Youth* 4, no. 3 (1918); 2–4.

¹⁹³ Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 44–46.

¹⁹⁴ Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment*, 133.

¹⁹⁵ Ding Ling, "Miss Sophia's Diary," in *Modern Chinese Stories and Novellas, 1919–1949*, ed. Joseph Lau and Howard Goldblatt (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); 312.

China.¹⁹⁶ In her lectures and essays, she highlighted the idea of “moral autonomy” (*zide*), arguing that the measure of a modern nation lay in its ability to cultivate independent moral agents, regardless of gender.¹⁹⁷ *Hu Shi*, her mentor and fellow reformist, endorsed this vision, calling for “the liberation of the mind” as the necessary prerequisite for women’s liberation.¹⁹⁸

The circulation of feminist print culture also expanded dramatically during this period. *The New Woman* (1919–1921), edited by radical journalist *Shi Liang* and activist *Xie Wanying*, published essays on contraception, marriage reform, and labor rights.¹⁹⁹ The journal’s editorial preface declared that “we do not seek the right to rule men, but the right to rule ourselves.”²⁰⁰ Its contributors, many of whom were teachers, students, and returned overseas scholars, used the press to negotiate between the personal and political complexities of emancipation. In doing so, they redefined journalism as a space of female authorship and collective consciousness.

At the same time, debates over marriage and family reform exposed the limits of May Fourth feminism. *Liang Qichao*’s earlier call for the “new citizen mother” remained distinguished among reformist men, who saw women’s emancipation as a means to strengthen family morality and national cohesion.²⁰¹ The *Civil Code debates* of the early 1920s, as documented by Susan Glosser, illustrate how even progressive legislators hesitated to endorse full gender equality in property and marriage law, preferring gradual reform within the

¹⁹⁶ Susan Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915–1953* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 29.

¹⁹⁷ Chen Hengzhe, “The Individual and the Nation,” *Education Review* (1919), reprinted in *Selected Works of Chen Hengzhe* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985); 72.

¹⁹⁸ Hu Shi, “On the Liberation of the Mind,” *New Youth* 2, no. 4 (1916); 5.

¹⁹⁹ “Editorial Preface,” *The New Woman* 1, no. 1 (1919); 1.

²⁰⁰ “Editorial Preface,” 2.

²⁰¹ Liang Qichao, “On the New Citizen Mother,” *Xinmin Congbao* (1902), reprinted in *Collected Essays of Liang Qichao* (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1989); 87.

patriarchal family structure.²⁰² This tension between autonomy and duty reveals that the May Fourth reevaluation of womanhood was not simply emancipatory; it was disciplinary. As Tani Barlow notes, to become a modern Chinese woman was to be educated into a new form of subjection: one internalized through the language of progress and citizenship.²⁰³ Modernity, in this sense, replaced the external authority of Confucian patriarchy with the internalized authority of nationalist virtue.

Nevertheless, the period between 1915 and 1925 witnessed the merging of a genuinely transnational feminist consciousness in China. Figures like *He Xiangning* and *Soong Ching-ling* connected women's activism to international socialist and anti-imperialist movements, positioning female emancipation within global struggles against capitalism and colonialism.²⁰⁴ Chinese feminist periodicals circulated alongside those from Japan and Korea, sharing ideas about suffrage, peace activism, and moral reform.²⁰⁵ These exchanges demonstrate that the intellectual and political transformations of Chinese women during this decade cannot be understood in independent terms; they were part of a larger East Asian conversation on how gender, nation, and modernity might be reconciled. In the end, the May Fourth movement reimagined the very designation of liberation. If late Qing reformers had pursued women's education to strengthen the family, May Fourth feminists envisioned education as a vehicle for selfhood, creativity, and citizenship. As *Chen Duxiu* wrote in 1916, "to free women is to free the nation, but to free the nation is first to free the mind."²⁰⁶ This dialectic between collective

²⁰² Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State*, 42.

²⁰³ Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese*, 156.

²⁰⁴ He Xiangning, "On the Women's Movement," *Women's News* (1922); 3.

²⁰⁵ Mackie, *Creating Socialist Women in Japan*, 45.

²⁰⁶ Chen Duxiu, "On the Liberation of Women," *New Youth* 3, no. 6 (1916); 2.

salvation and individual emancipation, never fully reconciled, remained the surviving legacy of women's activism in early modern China.

Conclusion

By 1920, women's activism in China had traversed a complex and often contradictory route, from moral reform and domestic education in the late Qing to intellectual emancipation and social critique in the early Republic. Yet, despite its profound cultural and political influence, the "women's question" remained unresolved. The reformers, educators, and writers who emerged between 1870 and 1920 were Shaohui Xue, Chen Xiefen, He-Yin Zhen, Qiu Jin, and Chen Hengzhe, among them, who transformed the meaning of womanhood in the Chinese imagination.²⁰⁷ They challenged the patriarchal foundations of Confucian society and forced the nation to confront the moral costs of modernization. But their vision of liberation was never entirely autonomous; it remained embedded in the state's nationalist and civilizational ambitions.

The early feminist movements in China sought to balance the moral with the political: women were to be "civilized mothers" and "educated citizens," yet rarely independent subjects of their own destinies. The discourse of *nǚjie qimeng* (women's enlightenment) promoted education as both a patriotic duty and a moral necessity, positioning women's advancement as the symbolic measure of national progress. As Dorothy Ko has written, this rhetoric freed women only to bind them anew in the language of civilization and reform.²⁰⁸ Women were urged to "rise for the nation," but not always for themselves. Even the radical thinkers of the *May Fourth* generation inherited this paradox. Their call for women's individuality and free love was

²⁰⁷ Shaohui Xue. "Women's Learning and Civilization." *Nǚxue Bao* (The Women's Journal); 1898.

²⁰⁸ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 15.

couched within an enduring expectation that the modern woman would embody a moral and emotional strength vital to the Republic's renewal. As Chen Hengzhe argued in 1919, "The woman's task is no longer to serve the home, but to build the nation, yet she must first build herself."²⁰⁹ This paradox, between collective salvation and personal freedom, confined the limits of women's emancipation in early modern China.

Still, these contradictions were productive. They generated a feminist discourse that, though incomplete, destabilized centuries of patriarchal orthodoxy and gave rise to a new political and intellectual class of women. The emergence of feminist journals, women's schools, and transnational activism marked the beginning of a public female subjectivity that would later expand in socialist, anti-imperialist, and international feminist movements. The period from 1870 to 1920 thus stands not as the conclusion of women's struggle in China, but as its foundation, laying the groundwork for an unfinished emancipation that revealed both the possibilities and the perils of linking gender to the nation.

²⁰⁹ Hengzhe, "The Individual and the Nation," 72.

Chapter Three: Unfinished Liberation: Women's Rights in Late Joseon and Early Colonial Korea

The period from the 1870s to the early 1910s, known in Korea as the *Kaehwa* or Enlightenment era, marked one of the most transformative moments in Korean history. During this period, Korea opened its ports to foreign trade and established diplomatic relations with Japan and Western nations, reshaping centuries of isolation and self-sufficiency. The country found itself amid regional upheaval: as China's traditional authority waned and Japan's power expanded, the centuries-old East Asian hierarchy fractured. Within this changing landscape, Korean intellectuals began to reimagine civilization, progress, and modernity. The *Kaehwa* movement emerged from this moment of crisis, driven by an urgent need to strengthen the nation and avoid China's fate under Western imperialism. Yet the modernization discourse known as *munmyeong kaehwa* ("civilization and enlightenment") was not purely a humanitarian project—it was a political strategy in which the elevation of women's status served as both a symbol and a tool of national survival.²¹⁰

Reformers and policymakers during the late Joseon dynasty sought gender equality not out of benevolence but as a necessary marker of a "civilized" state.²¹¹ Across Asia, Western observers have come to associate women's status with national strength. A nation's degree of enlightenment, it was argued, could be measured by the education and social visibility of its women. Yet their motivations were pragmatic rather than revolutionary: reformers believed that

²¹⁰ Kim, "Under the Mandate of Nationalism," 120.

²¹¹ Joseon Dynasty Legal Codes and Confucian Texts. Translated excerpts in *Sources of Korean Tradition*, edited by Yong-ho Ch'oe, Peter H. Lee, and Wm. Theodore de Bary. Vol. 2. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

educating women would produce enlightened mothers capable of raising modern, patriotic sons. Thus, the reform of women's status became inseparable from the reform of the nation, a dynamic that defined the limits of women's activism in late nineteenth-century Korea.²¹²

The shock of China's defeat in the Arrow War (1856–1858) and the growing encroachment of Western imperialism further convinced Korean leaders that the nation's survival depended on rapid modernization. China's humiliation at Western hands shattered Korea's long-held confidence in the Sinocentric order and forced a reckoning with new geopolitical realities. For Korean reformers, modernization required redefining civilization itself, and women were central to that redefinition. However, the intellectual and moral foundations of Korea's modernization were divided. One camp drew inspiration from Western missionary ideas and Christian education, while the other aligned with *Ch'öndogyo*, an indigenous religion born of the *Tonghak* movement that blended Confucian, Buddhist, and egalitarian ideals. Both groups viewed women's moral and educational uplift as essential to national regeneration. Still, their goals differed: Christian reformers framed women's advancement as part of a civilizing mission tied to Western modernity. At the same time, *Ch'öndogyo* adherents envisioned gender equality as a spiritual and social corrective to Confucian hierarchy.²¹³ In both cases, however, the language of reform used women symbolically, as bearers of virtue and emblems of progress, rather than as autonomous citizens.

As Yung-Hee Kim argues in “Under the Mandate of Nationalism,” women's rights in Korea did not emerge from feminist consciousness but from a broader nationalist exigency.

²¹² Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, 241.

²¹³ Carl Young, “Into the Sunset: Ch'öndogyo in North Korea, 1945–1950,” *Journal of Korean Religions* 4, no. 2 (2013); 58.

Reforming women was a strategic necessity to present Korea as modern and civilized in the face of foreign threats. Feminist progress, therefore, was not driven by benevolence or social enlightenment but by survival. Kim's research traces the complex genealogy of this activism, revealing how both Western and indigenous movements simultaneously challenged and reinforced gender hierarchies. While Christianity introduced new models of female education, it also imposed patriarchal and colonial values, positioning Korean women as moral exemplars rather than political actors. Likewise, while *Ch'ōndogyo* promoted the spiritual equality of men and women, its activism primarily focused on moral reform rather than structural change. In both cases, women's rights were constrained by the twin forces of patriarchy and nationalism.²¹⁴

The reforms that did materialize, such as the establishment of schools for girls, women's associations, and new legal discussions surrounding family and marriage, primarily benefited urban and elite women. Rural women, bound by economic hardship and traditional hierarchies, remained excluded from these transformations. As Kim notes, "modernization" offered women new opportunities but also reinforced divisions along class and geographic lines. These contradictions expose the paradox at the heart of Korea's modernization project: the same discourse that sought to "liberate" women also disciplined them into national symbols of virtue, domesticity, and sacrifice.²¹⁵

Yet within these contradictions lay the seeds of subtle resistance. Even as reform agendas instrumentalized women, female activists began to appropriate reformist rhetoric to carve out spaces of agency. Educators and Christian women's leaders reframed the notion of the "wise

²¹⁴ Kim, "Under the Mandate of Nationalism," 128.

²¹⁵ Haesong Park "Christian Feminist Helen Kim and Her Compromise in Service to Syngman Rhee," *Korea Journal* 60, no. 4 (2020); 175.

mother and good wife” (*hyŏnmo yangch’ŏ*) to include civic participation, community service, and social reform. Women’s magazines and literary circles began to articulate a distinctly Korean female consciousness, blending nationalist ideals with critiques of patriarchy. Their activism was not revolutionary in form but transformative in effect; it challenged the moral, religious, and political frameworks that had defined womanhood for centuries. This complex negotiation between compliance and defiance reveals that women’s activism during the *Kaehwa* and early colonial years was neither wholly nationalist nor purely feminist, but a dynamic process of adaptation within structures of domination.²¹⁶

Korean women’s activism from 1870 to 1920, therefore, cannot be understood as a straightforward road towards liberation. It was instead a historically contingent struggle shaped by the interplay of global modernity, colonial subjugation, and national concerns. Reformers justified women’s education and limited social mobility as tools of national strength, not as universal rights. Yet women seized these limited opportunities to redefine their place within the nation, demonstrating that activism in this period was as much about negotiation as resistance. The *Kaehwa* era produced not a feminist revolution, but a series of contested reforms that reflected Korea’s precarious search for modernity. As the nation faced the growing shadow of Japanese imperialism, women’s rights remained unfinished, caught between the rhetoric of civilization and the realities of patriarchy.

Historical and Social Obstacles: The Fall of Sino-Centrism and Korea's Identity Crisis

The *Kaehwa* period, beginning in the 1870s, represented Korea's forced awakening to a world order no longer defined by Chinese authority. The defeat of the Qing dynasty in the Arrow War (Second Opium War, 1856–58) profoundly destabilized Korea's worldview. The

²¹⁶ Chungmoo Choi, “The Discourse of Decolonization: Popular Memory: South Korea,” *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, Routledge, 1998; 33.

humiliation of China at the hands of Western powers revealed the fragility of the old Sinocentric hierarchy and exposed Korea's own vulnerability. As Kim Haboush notes, "China's predicament posed a challenge to the validity of the long-practiced symbiotic Sino-centrism of the Korean government and made Korea face a formidable task of defining its own new identity and devising strategies to avoid repeating China's political disaster."²¹⁷

In this new landscape, Korea sought to modernize without losing its cultural coherence. Yet this balancing act fractured the nation into competing ideological camps. Reformers inspired by Western liberalism emphasized education and the scientific spirit, while proponents of indigenous reform, particularly those influenced by Ch'öndogyo (the "Heavenly Way" religion), called for spiritual and moral renewal grounded in native traditions. Both camps, however, converged on the idea that improving the status of women was essential to building a "civilized" nation. The reformist slogan *munmyeong kaehwa* explicitly linked women's education to national prestige: "If a woman held a low status, that was seen as reflective of an inferior civilization."²¹⁸

This rhetoric was not unique to Korea. In Meiji Japan, similar arguments had been deployed to justify state-sponsored "good wife, wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo*) education, and Chinese reformers like Liang Qichao and Jin Tianhe equated women's progress with that of the nation. Yet, as Kim notes, the Korean case was uniquely complicated: women's rights developed less from genuine feminist intent and more from Korea's immersion in nationalist crisis, in which external pressures from the West and Japan made national survival the central rationale for promoting limited reforms for women.²¹⁹ This instrumentalization of women's activism

²¹⁷ JaHyun Kim Haboush, *The Confucian Kingship in Korea: Yōngjo and the Politics of Sagacity* (Columbia University Press, 2001), 45.

²¹⁸ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 24.

²¹⁹ Kim, "Under the Mandate of Nationalism," 122.

underscores the central paradox of Korea's modernization. On the surface, policies encouraging women's education and legal reform appeared progressive; in practice, there were measures to fortify the state against external threats rather than to promote genuine gender equality.

Reformist leaders believed that a nation's strength was measured by the virtue and education of its women. Still, this virtue was defined within a patriarchal logic that subordinated women's autonomy to national necessity. As a result, early women's activism unfolded within ideological constraints that often limited its radical potential.

Socially, Korean women faced entrenched hierarchies reinforced by centuries of Neo-Confucian doctrine. Marriage and family laws privileged patrilineal inheritance; concubinage remained legal, and women's movements were geographically, and class limited. Urban elites, especially those exposed to missionary education, benefited most from these reforms, while rural and lower-class women remained constrained by economic and cultural barriers.²²⁰ Even when women gained access to education, their curricula emphasized domesticity and morality over intellectual or professional development.

In this sense, the Enlightenment period was both revolutionary and regressive. It created new public spaces for women but defined those spaces through male-centered visions of progress. The state and male reformers appropriated the rhetoric of women's liberation to demonstrate Korea's fitness for modern civilization. Yet, as Kim notes, "there existed about thirty such women's organizations scattered throughout the country across social class lines and creeds, including women of Confucian nobility, concubines, merchants' wives, women wine sellers, female servants, and Christian women." Therefore, it is worthwhile to acknowledge that Korean feminism was not a straightforward movement but one that was continually tested and

²²⁰ Kim, "Under the Mandate of Nationalism," 128.

negotiated by geopolitical influences, class hierarchies, and national and social agendas.²²¹ The resulting "modern woman" of the Kaehwa period was not an autonomous subject but a symbol, a vessel through which men articulated Korea's modern identity.

Confucian Patriarchy and Gender Hierarchies

The modernization of Korea in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not begin in an ideological vacuum. This modernization was shaped by the enduring influence of Neo-Confucian patriarchy, a system that had, for centuries, codified hierarchy as moral order. The social fabric of Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910) rested upon what Martina Deuchler famously termed the "Confucian transformation," a process that recasts kinship, gender, and status through patriarchal lineages.²²² Women's roles were not merely domestic expectations but moral imperatives, bound to the maintenance of filial piety and male authority.

This structure, solidified between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, produced what Deuchler calls a "lineage society," in which a woman's worth was defined by her capacity to uphold the purity of patrilineal descent.²²³ Under this ideology, the family became the microcosm of the state, and the subordination of women was not viewed as oppression but as naturalized virtue.²²⁴ While Deuchler's sentiment was used in relation to Chong Mong-ju's displeasure with Buddhist monks, it still offers insight into how female chastity, obedience, and ritual propriety served as the moral pillars of the Chosŏn order. A widow's remarriage, for instance, was legally and socially condemned, and the principle of *yeolnyeo* (chaste womanhood) was celebrated as the epitome of moral rectitude.

²²¹ Kim, "Under the Mandate of Nationalism," 132.

²²² Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, 3.

²²³ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, 87.

²²⁴ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, 104.

This rigid patriarchal framework profoundly shaped how reformers in the late nineteenth century understood the "woman question." When reform-minded elites began to advocate women's education or public participation, they did so within Confucian moral limits. Even among progressive intellectuals, the idea of equality was interpreted as women's fulfillment of their duties as mothers, wives, and educators of sons. In this sense, modernization did not immediately challenge patriarchy; instead, it reinterpreted patriarchal values through the rhetoric of civilization and progress. Haboush observes that, for reformers, women's moral and intellectual refinement was crucial to the nation's survival. In her research on Confucian Kingship in Korea, while she doesn't discuss women directly, her book centers on men's roles; the women who live alongside them offer an opportunity to witness how they interact.²²⁵ Yet this moral vision simultaneously confined women's activism within the domestic and symbolic realm. While male reformers praised women's capacity to contribute to national enlightenment, they often envisioned that contribution as maternal influence rather than political agency.

The result was a peculiar contradiction: as the nation moved toward "modernity," the modern woman was defined not by independence but by her usefulness to patriarchal reform. Hyaeweol Choi describes this paradox as a process of selective modernization, in which Confucian domestic ideology was reimagined rather than discarded, at least regarding women.²²⁶ Women's education was promoted as a civilizing force precisely because it produced disciplined, virtuous, and patriotic mothers. The *kyoyuk momyŏng* (education enlightenment) campaigns of the 1890s exemplified this selective transformation. Schools such as Ewha Haktang, established by American missionaries but supported by reform-minded Koreans, taught literacy and

²²⁵ Haboush, *Confucian Kingship in Korea*, 51.

²²⁶ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, ix.

domestic sciences while reinforcing moral conduct rooted in Confucian propriety. The curriculum aimed to produce, as one missionary entreated, "we have heard it said over and over lately that the best families now demand an educated daughter-in-law the ideal of "educated" daughter, wife, and mother was considered crucial for the creation and proliferation of the Christian family who would adhere to religious devotion while applying "scientific" knowledge to homemaking."²²⁷ Even among secular reformers, this logic persisted: the educated woman was valuable because she was instrumental to national moral reform, not because she possessed inherent rights or subjectivity.

Within this ideological context, women's activism emerged as both a continuation and a quiet subversion of the Confucian order. While women often framed their advocacy in moral or maternal terms, their public visibility challenged the very boundaries of domesticity. By participating in reformist associations, publishing essays, and teaching in girls' schools, women occupied new spaces of intellectual and social influence. Yet these acts of participation were always precarious, legitimized only insofar as they served family, morality, or nation. This ambivalence is evident in the writings of early female reformers such as Na Hye-sŏk and Kim Hwal-lan (Helen Kim). Both women were deeply influenced by missionary education and Western feminist ideas, yet they articulated women's empowerment in ways that remained compatible with national and moral duty. Helen Kim, for example, often justified women's education as the sacred responsibility of motherhood in the modern nation.²²⁸ Her later political compromises under Syngman Rhee's regime have often been criticized, but they also underscore how women's activism was constrained by the same nationalistic discourses that first enabled it.

²²⁷ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 178.

²²⁸ Haesong Park, "Christian Feminist Helen," 7.

In short, the Confucian order provided both the ideological barrier and the moral vocabulary for early women's activism. Reformers could not completely discard the values that underpinned Korean identity; instead, they selectively reinterpreted them. As Deuchler notes, the Confucian transformation of Korea did not disappear with the advent of modernity; it merely adjusted its moral grammar to new political realities, as she illustrates in diagrams in her text.²²⁹ Women's activism thus developed not in opposition to patriarchy, but through its reinterpretation, a reform movement born out of constraint. This enduring tension, between liberation and loyalty, autonomy and obligation, remained central to women's reform of discourse through the early twentieth century. Even as the colonial and nationalist movements of the 1910s and 1920s expanded women's public roles, they continued to define women's value through their service to higher moral or political causes. The Confucian past, rather than being discarded, persisted as the invisible framework within which modern gender politics unfolded.

The Kabo Reforms and the Politics of Women's Rights

The 1894 Kabo Reforms (Kabo Kyŏngjang) marked one of the most decisive political turning points in Korean history. Emerging from the confluence of domestic unrest and international pressure, these reforms attempted to modernize Korea's institutions in the image of Japan's Meiji Restoration while asserting sovereignty amid Chinese decline and Japanese ascendancy. Yet for women, the Kabo Reforms represented a contradictory moment, simultaneously a promise of liberation and a re-inscription of patriarchal and colonial hierarchies. The Kabo Reform movement was, at its core, an elite-driven initiative to redefine Korea's social and political identity within the global order of "civilized nations." As Kim observes, the modern reform discourse did not stem from a benevolent concern for women's

²²⁹ Deuchler, *Confucian Transformation of Korea*, 213.

emancipation but from a desperate need for national survival.²³⁰ Reformers such as Yu Kil-chun and Pak Yŏng-hyo argued that a nation could not be considered civilized if its women remained uneducated and subservient.²³¹ Thus, the elevation of women's status was framed as a metric of progress, not recognition of individual rights.

Under the Kabo legislation, certain traditional restrictions were formally abolished: the class system (*yangban*, *chungin*, and *chŏnmin*) was dismantled, the slavery system was officially ended, and widows were no longer legally prohibited from remarrying.²³² These changes, while progressive on paper, were primarily aimed at dismantling what reformers saw as “feudal impediments” to modernization rather than addressing gender injustice. Reformers targeted “feudal impediments” because these customs obstructed national modernization, whereas addressing gender injustice would have required confronting patriarchal structures for the sake of women themselves, something the reform agenda never fully attempted.

The newly codified equality was symbolic, an affirmation that Korea was no longer an archaic Confucian state but a “modern nation” worthy of diplomatic recognition. In actuality, the effects of the Kabo Reforms were uneven. Urban women from elite or missionary backgrounds benefited the most from the limited educational and occupational opportunities that followed. In contrast, rural and lower-class women remained bound to traditional labor structures. Kim notes that the apparent advancement of women's rights under the Kabo Reforms masked the persistence of gendered inequalities determined by class and geography.²³³ The reforms did not

²³⁰ Kim, “Under the Mandate of Nationalism,” 122.

²³¹ Kim, “Under the Mandate of Nationalism,” 125.

²³² Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, 215.

²³³ Kim, “Under the Mandate of Nationalism,” 129.

dismantle patriarchal authority within the household; instead, they relocated it within the rhetoric of civilization and nationalism.

One of the most significant aspects of this transformation was the state's instrumentalization of women's morality as a political tool. The government's 1895 decree on women's education, for instance, emphasized that female literacy was necessary "to cultivate moral virtue and strengthen the home."²³⁴ Here, education was not envisioned as empowerment but as the moralization of the populace through disciplined mothers and wives. Such rhetoric mirrored the "good wife, wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo*) ideology imported from Meiji Japan, itself a hybrid of Confucian domesticity and Western utilitarianism.²³⁵ Korean reformers adapted this model to fit their own nationalist agenda, arguing that women's education was essential for producing loyal citizens and morally upright families.

This strategic reframing of women's roles illustrates the paradox of modernization: women were included in the national project only as instruments of its moral regeneration. As Deuchler reminds us, modernization in Korea did not abolish Confucian values; it simply altered their function.²³⁶ The mother became the moral cornerstone of the modern home, her virtue now serving not only familial stability but the strength of the nation. This gendered nationalism defined much of the discourse surrounding women's activism at the turn of the century. Yet within this limited framework, women began to appropriate the language of reform for their own purposes. Early publications such as *The Independent* (*Tongnip Sinmun*) and *The Women's News* (*Yoja Sinmun*) in the late 1890s provided platforms for women to discuss education, morality,

²³⁴ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 37.

²³⁵ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 38.

²³⁶ Deuchler, *Confucian Transformation of Korea*, 218.

and the nation's future.²³⁷ These essays often echoed the moral rhetoric of reformers but subtly expanded their implications. Women writers argued that true civilization required not only educated mothers but women capable of participating in public life. By reframing moral virtue as civic participation, they challenged the boundaries of domestic ideology while remaining within its acceptable moral language.

This discursive strategy, what Chungmoo Choi calls the double consciousness of modern Korean women, was a defining feature of activism during this period.²³⁸ Women engaged in reform through socially acceptable roles, yet their very participation disrupted patriarchal expectations. For instance, the establishment of women's schools, reading circles, and charitable societies in Seoul and Pyongyang created new networks of female solidarity that transcended household boundaries. These institutions were often small and elite, but they also laid out the groundwork for later organized activism in the colonial period. However, the state's appropriation of women's reforms also revealed the limits of national enlightenment. While the Kabo Reforms positioned women as symbols of modernization, they excluded them from political citizenship. The very discourse that proclaimed Korea's entry into the modern world also reinforced the idea that women's place was to serve that world from within the private sphere. Thus, the reforms simultaneously expanded and constricted women's horizons, a contradiction that defined Korea's transition into the twentieth century.

Ultimately, the Kabo Reforms signaled not the triumph of feminist ideals but the beginning of a new kind of subordination, one justified by modernity itself. As Kim argues, women's progress in late nineteenth-century Korea must be understood not as emancipation from

²³⁷ Kim, "Under the Mandate of Nationalism," 130.

²³⁸ Choi, "The Discourse of Decolonization," 78.

patriarchy but as its reconfiguration within the nationalist order.²³⁹ The rhetoric of civilization provided both the language of liberation and the logic of exclusion. By 1900, women stood at the center of Korea's moral and symbolic identity yet remained at the margins of its political life. The modern woman was constructed as a bearer of tradition in a contemporary form, a paradox that would continue to shape Korean women's activism through the colonial and postcolonial periods.

Christianity, Mission Schools, and the Paradox of Benevolent Reform

Among the most transformative forces in Korea's modernization was the introduction of Christianity, particularly through American and British Protestant missions in the late nineteenth century. Missionaries established schools, hospitals, and publishing houses that profoundly influenced Korea's intellectual and moral landscape. For women, this encounter with Christianity initially appeared to offer unprecedented opportunities: literacy, education, and community leadership. Yet, as scholars such as Hyaeweol Choi and Haesong Park demonstrate, missionary activity also introduced a new form of patriarchal moral order, replacing Confucian hierarchies with Christian domestic ideals.²⁴⁰

These early Christian missions in Korea must be understood within the broader framework of cultural imperialism. Missionaries entered the peninsula with the dual ambition of saving souls and "civilizing" an allegedly backward society. This civilizing mission often conflated moral virtue with Western values, particularly the ideals of monogamous marriage, domestic purity, and female submission. As Choi acknowledges, the missionary encounter constructed the 'new woman' not as an autonomous subject, but as a Christian moral agent whose

²³⁹ Kim, "Under the Mandate of Nationalism," 132.

²⁴⁰ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 12.

virtue embodied both Western and Korean ideals of womanhood.²⁴¹ In this way, Christianity redefined the moral vocabulary of women's reform while maintaining the fundamental logic of gender hierarchy.

Mission schools such as Ewha Haktang (founded in 1886 by Mary Scranton) and Paehwa Girls' School became the central sites of women's education during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁴² These institutions taught Korean girls reading, arithmetic, and hygiene, but their curriculum also emphasized humility, obedience, and the sanctity of marriage.²⁴³ The "Christian home" was presented as the moral nucleus of national progress, an idea that resonated deeply with both missionary and nationalist agendas. The ideal Christian woman was expected to be literate and spiritually refined, yet her education was ultimately designed to prepare her for domestic service rather than public leadership.

Helen Kim (Kim Hwal-lan), the first Korean woman to receive a Ph.D. and later president of Ewha College, embodied the tensions within this system. A devout Christian and advocate of women's education, Kim argued that a woman's enlightenment is the light that illuminates the moral darkness of the nation.²⁴⁴ Yet her reformist's rhetoric, while progressive in tone, reinforced the association between women's virtue and national salvation.²⁴⁵ As Park Haesong notes, Kim's Christian feminism was a negotiation between empowerment and

²⁴¹ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 19.

²⁴² Scranton, Mary F. "Letter from Seoul, Korea." January 19, 1886. Ewha Archives, Ewha Woman's University Museum, Seoul.

²⁴³ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 36.

²⁴⁴ Park, "Christian Feminist Helen Kim," 12.

²⁴⁵ Her publicly available biography describes her career path (born in Busan, moved to Canada in middle school, studied at NYU, etc.), but does *not* mention a published memoir or autobiography.

subjugation, reflecting the broader dilemma faced by educated Korean women: how to advance women's causes without transgressing patriarchal or nationalist expectations.²⁴⁶

Missionary education thus created a paradoxical form of activism, one that simultaneously empowered and restricted. By promoting literacy and leadership among women, missions equipped them with tools for public engagement. Many graduates of mission schools went on to create women's organizations, publish essays, and participate in reform movements. Yet these activities were frequently framed in moral or religious terms that reasserted women's role as the nation's conscience. Choi takes this conversation further by stating that "the majority of married women ... pass all examinations in the end and often do better than their husbands."²⁴⁷ This paradox was further complicated by the intersection of religion and nationalism. As Japanese imperial power expanded in Korea after 1905, Christianity became both a spiritual refuge and a site of political negotiation. Some Korean Christians, including women, used church networks to organize anti-colonial resistance, while others, particularly elites like Helen Kim, aligned with nationalist leaders such as Syngman Rhee, seeing cooperation as the path to modernization.²⁴⁸ In both cases, women's activism was filtered through the language of service and sacrifice, a moral economy inherited from both Confucian and Christian traditions.

The Western missionary narrative of benevolence also obscured the colonial logic embedded in its educational mission. Missionaries frequently contrasted the "liberated Christian woman" with the "enslaved Confucian woman," positioning Christianity as the singular path to moral and social progress.²⁴⁹ This rhetoric not only reinforced Western cultural superiority but

²⁴⁶ Park, "Christian Feminist Helen Kim," 13.

²⁴⁷ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 28.

²⁴⁸ Park, "Christian Feminist Helen Kim," 12.

²⁴⁹ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 28.

also marginalized indigenous reform traditions, such as the moral egalitarianism found in Ch'öndogyo or the gender critiques within Tonghak thought. By dismissing these movements as "superstitious" or "heathen," missionaries delegitimized local frameworks of liberation that might have led to more culturally rooted forms of gender reform.

Moreover, the Christian ideal of womanhood often clashed with emerging secular feminist voices. Writers like Na Hye-sök and Kim Myöng-sun, influenced by both Western thought and Korean modernist literature, criticized the moral constraints imposed by Confucianism and Christianity. In her 1918 essay "A Woman's View on Love," Na Hye-sök denounced the hypocrisy of a society that demanded chastity from women while tolerating male immorality.²⁵⁰ Her critique exposed the continuity between the old and new patriarchies, showing that Christian reform had not dismantled double standards but merely recast them in a modern idiom. In this light, the missionary encounter must be understood not as a liberating force, but as a complex negotiation of gendered power. It provided women with access to literacy, organization, and moral authority, yet it circumscribed their agency within a framework of service and purity.

As Choi aptly concludes, missionary efforts did not create a feminist revolution; it created moral agents of nationalism.²⁵¹ The benevolence that missions promised was, in practice, a moral discipline that aligned women's education with the needs of empire, church, and state. Thus, Christianity's legacy in Korea is not dismissed as a narrative of emancipation. It was a contradictory engine of modernity, simultaneously progressive and patriarchal, empowering and restrictive. Korean women's activism during this period emerged not simply because of

²⁵⁰ Hye-sök Na, "A Woman's View on Love," *Sin Yöja* (1918).

²⁵¹ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 61.

missionary influence, but often in resistance to the limitations that missionary ideology imposed. In appropriating Christian rhetoric for nationalist and feminist goals, women like Helen Kim, Na Hye-sŏk, and countless unnamed educators transformed the language of moral reform into a subtle but enduring critique of the systems that sought to contain them.

Indigenous Movements and the Reinterpretation of Modern Womanhood

While Western missionaries often claimed credit for the “awakening” of Korean women, the reality of early women’s activism was far more complex and deeply rooted in indigenous intellectual and religious traditions. Movements such as Tonghak (Eastern Learning) and its later transformation into Ch’ŏndogyo articulated moral and social visions that directly challenged hierarchical Confucian patriarchy long before Western feminists or missionaries arrived. These movements not only redefined the ethical relationship between men and women but also offered an alternative, distinctly Korean spiritual foundation for reform.

The Tonghak Rebellion of 1894, often remembered for its political consequences, was also a crucial moment in the evolution of social thought concerning gender and equality. Emerging in the late Joseon period, Tonghak (literally “Eastern Learning”) arose as a direct response to the perceived moral decay of the ruling elite and the encroachment of Western powers. Its founder, Ch’oe Che-u (1824–1864), developed a doctrine that blended Confucian ethics with Buddhist compassion, shamanic spirituality, and egalitarian humanism. His teaching of *Innaecheon* (人乃天, “Humans are Heaven”) emphasized the inherent divinity and equality of all human beings.²⁵² Though not a feminist movement in the modern sense, this philosophy

²⁵² Ch’oe Che-u, *Tonggyŏng taejŏn* (The Great Scripture of the Eastern Learning), trans. in Yong-chun Kim, “The Religious Thought of Ch’oe Che-u,” *Korean Journal of Religious Studies* 3 (1988), 45–67.

destabilized long-standing social hierarchies, including those that defined women as inherently inferior.

As Carl Young observes in his study of Ch'öndogyo's later development, the Tonghak and Ch'öndogyo traditions reimagined the moral order not as a fixed hierarchy but as a living relationship between the divine and the human, the male and the female. Despite women only making up 5.7 percent of the party, these traditions would still play an essential role in women's social positions.²⁵³ This metaphysical egalitarianism offered women a moral and spiritual vocabulary that contrasted sharply with both Confucian orthodoxy and Christian missionary paternalism. While Confucianism confined women to the domestic sphere and Christianity idealized them as moral custodians, Ch'öndogyo envisioned human dignity as a universal attribute, inherent rather than granted by education, class, or faith.

Under the leadership of Son Byong-hui (1861–1922), Ch'öndogyo evolved into an organized reformist religion that played a major role in the nationalist movements of the early twentieth century, including the March First Movement of 1919.²⁵⁴ This nationwide protest Japanese colonial rule was notable not only for its political impact but also for the visibility of women participants. Members of women's organizations such as Ch'öndogyo Yöja Hoe (Women's Association of Ch'öndogyo) distributed leaflets, organized prayer gatherings, and supported imprisoned activists.²⁵⁵ Their participation demonstrated how religious reform could merge seamlessly with nationalist activism, offering women a legitimate path to public engagement within moral and spiritual frameworks.

²⁵³ Young, "Into the Sunset," 57.

²⁵⁴ Andre Schmid, *Korea Between Empires, 1895–1919* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 143.

²⁵⁵ Young, "Into the Sunset," 59.

Ch'öndogyo's inclusive ethos also intersected with other indigenous reform movements that questioned social hierarchies, particularly the abolition of the nobi (slave) system and the class restrictions that limited women's mobility.²⁵⁶ Dongsoo Kim acknowledges that these early reforms, while officially aimed at social modernization, were implicitly informed by the moral vision of equality that Eastern Learning had articulated decades earlier.²⁵⁷ Thus, even as state-led reforms such as the Kabo Reforms (1894–1896) abolished class distinctions and legalized female education, their ideological roots lay partly in indigenous currents of moral humanism rather than purely Western models.

However, women's participation in these indigenous movements was fraught with tension. Despite Ch'öndogyo's egalitarian theology, its institutional leadership remained overwhelmingly male, and women's roles were often limited to auxiliary or supportive capacities. This contradiction reflected the broader dilemma of reform in Korea during this period: social movements espoused equality in theory but struggled to implement it in practice. As Kim argues, Korean feminism developed not as a coherent ideology, but as a fragmented response to overlapping structures of patriarchy, nationalism, and colonial domination.²⁵⁸ The result was a form of activism that was pragmatic rather than doctrinal; women navigated within male-dominated movements to claim small but meaningful spaces of autonomy.

One of the most compelling examples of such navigation was the formation of the Chanyanghoe (Praise Society) in 1898, founded by elite women who sought to advance girls'

²⁵⁶ Michael Seth, *A Concise History of Korea: From the Neolithic to the 21st Century* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 183.

²⁵⁷ Dongsoo Kim, "The Abolition of the Nobi System and the Transformation of Korean Society," *Korean Studies* 28 (2004): 74.

²⁵⁸ Kim, "Under the Mandate of Nationalism, 122.

education and moral reform.²⁵⁹ This organization was influenced by both nationalist rhetoric and indigenous moral philosophies that stressed the collective good. Their activities were often publicized in *The Independent* (Dongnip Sinmun), which printed the famous 1896 article “A Circular for the Establishment of a Girls’ School.”²⁶⁰ This appeal, authored collectively by reformists, argued that even small children know that we should transform ourselves by adopting Western ways. Yet, its logic was not purely Westernizing; it also reflected the Confucian and Ch’öndogyo conviction that moral education was the foundation of national renewal.²⁶¹

The women of Chanyanghoe and related groups represented a new hybrid identity: reformers who blended indigenous moral frameworks with global feminist currents. Their activism was not framed as rebellion but as restoration, restoration of moral order, familial harmony, and national strength. In this sense, their feminism was both radical and conservative, challenging gender hierarchies while reaffirming the moral duties expected of women. This duality mirrored the contradictions at the heart of Korean modernity itself: the simultaneous embrace of progress and tradition, autonomy and duty, nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

By the early 1920s, the language of women’s reform had expanded to include both “modern” (kūndae) and “new” (sin) womanhood. Still, its conceptual foundations were already established by the late nineteenth-century convergence of Confucian, Ch’öndogyo, and nationalist discourses. Writers like Kim Won-ju (pen name Kim Myöng-sun) and Na Hye-sök inherited this intellectual legacy, transforming its moral vocabulary into explicit critiques of gender and power. Their essays and fiction articulated what Ch’öndogyo had only implied—that

²⁵⁹ Chanyanghoe (찬양회) Charter and Meeting Minutes, 1898. Ewha Archives, Seoul.

²⁶⁰ “A Circular for the Establishment of a Girls’ School,” *The Independent* (Seoul), 1896.

²⁶¹ “A Circular for the Establishment of a Girls’ School,” *The Independent* (Seoul), 1896.

equality was not merely an ethical ideal, but a political necessity. Thus, women's activism in Korea between 1870 and 1920 cannot be understood solely through the lens of Western influence or colonial encounter. It emerged from the intersection of indigenous spiritual reform, nationalist urgency, and the moral reimagining of the social order. Ch'öndogyo's vision of the divine within the human offered women a theological foundation for dignity, while nationalist movements provided the political impetus for collective action. Together, they produced a distinctive Korean feminism, one rooted not in individualism or benevolence, but in moral reciprocity and the pursuit of collective liberation.

Law, Reform, and the Limits of Emancipation

The closing years of the nineteenth century marked a profound period of legal and social transformation in Korea. At the heart of these changes were the Kabo Reforms (1894–1896), a sweeping series of modernizing policies enacted in the wake of the Donghak Rebellion and increasing Japanese pressure. While these reforms are often celebrated as Korea's first step progress, yet they were also an instrument of state control, framed through the language of “civilization” and “modernization” rather than gender justice.²⁶² Although these reforms are often hailed as milestones of progress, they were also tools of state-building shaped by discourses of “civilization” and “modernization.” Crucially, however, this alignment with state interests was intentional: early feminists leveraged nationalist rhetoric because it was the most effective, and sometimes the only, path for advancing women's rights.

The Kabo Reform Edicts abolished hereditary class distinctions, abolished slavery, and granted women limited access to education and property rights.²⁶³ In principle, these measures

²⁶² Seth, *A Concise History of Korea*, 176–179.

²⁶³ Kim, “The Abolition of the Nobi System,” 74–76.

promised to create a more egalitarian society. Yet, as Eun-shil Kim observes that the rhetoric of reform was national before it was social, and masculine before it was inclusive.²⁶⁴ The state's modernization project was primarily concerned with strengthening Korea's sovereignty and international prestige, not with redressing gender inequality. In this sense, women's "liberation" was essentially a byproduct of state survival. As Heisook Kim explains, the Kabo Reforms used the discourse of enlightenment (*kaehwa*) to redefine the moral duties of citizens, yet women were still expected to embody the domestic virtue that would sustain the nation.²⁶⁵ The symbolic figure of the "wise mother and good wife" (*hyŏnmo yangch'o*) borrowed from Meiji Japan became the model for the new modern woman. Her purpose was not emancipation, but national service through moral cultivation and child-rearing.

One of the early intellectuals to articulate the tension between modernization and morality was Pak Yong-hyo, whose 1885 *Letter on Enlightenment* argued that Korea's survival required the moral reformation of its people.²⁶⁶ Though Pak advocated educational reform and gender inclusion, his vision of women's empowerment was pragmatic rather than radical: educated women were necessary for producing enlightened citizens. As he wrote, if women are ignorant, how can they instruct their children in morality and patriotism?²⁶⁷ His statement reflects the pervasive utilitarian logic of reform: women's education was valued insofar as it served national objectives, not as an intrinsic right.

²⁶⁴ Eun-shil Kim, "Gender, Modernity, and the Kabo Reforms," *Asian Women* 17 (2003); 40.

²⁶⁵ Heisook Kim, "The Enlightenment and the Gender Question in Late Chosŏn Korea," *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 17, no. 1 (2004); 95.

²⁶⁶ Yong-hyo Pak, "Letter on Enlightenment," 1885, in *Sources of Korean Tradition*, ed. Yong-ho Ch'oe, Peter H. Lee, and Wm. Theodore de Bary, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); 312–315.

²⁶⁷ Pak, "Letter on Enlightenment," 314.

Nevertheless, women reformers appropriated this nationalist logic for their own purposes. Figures such as Kim Hwal-lan (Helen Kim), educated at missionary and Western institutions, reframed the discourse of national duty to argue for female education and leadership. Helen Kim later founded Ewha College, envisioning it as a site for women's spiritual and civic training. Yet, as Haesong Park observes, her alliance with Syngman Rhee's nationalist regime revealed a pattern of compromise in which feminist aspirations were subsumed under the language of Christian nationalism.²⁶⁸ Kim's activism thus embodied both the possibility and peril of reform within patriarchal systems, her success depended upon alignment with male-dominated structures of authority.

Legal change, then, did not automatically translate into social transformation. The post-Kabo period exposed the gap between law and lived experience, particularly in family law and marriage. While legal codes began to recognize the rights of widows and daughters to inherit property, Confucian filial norms and patrilineal inheritance customs continued to dominate everyday life.²⁶⁹ In rural regions, arranged marriages persisted as economic transactions, and female education remained limited to elite urban families. The resulting contradiction produced what historian Chungmoo Choi calls a fragmented consciousness of tolerance. Women were simultaneously subjects of reform and objects of control.²⁷⁰

Yet, this contradiction also catalyzes a new kind of activism. Women reformers began to expose the hypocrisy of male reformers who preached enlightenment while maintaining patriarchal privilege. The publication of *Sin Yŏja* (*New Woman*) magazine in 1920 marked the

²⁶⁸ Park, "Christian Feminist Helen Kim," 2.

²⁶⁹ Schmid, *Korea Between Empires*, 112–115.

²⁷⁰ Choi, "The Discourse of Decolonization," 20.

culmination of this critique. Early contributors like Na Hye-sŏk and Kim Myŏng-sun directly challenged the paternalism of nationalist and legal reforms, arguing that a nation cannot be civilized if its women remain enslaved by custom.²⁷¹ Their writing illuminated the dissonance between formal modernization and social emancipation. Moreover, women's reform movements during this period were not monolithic. Christian feminists, Ch'ŏndogyo women, and nationalist educators often operated in distinct ideological arenas, yet they shared the awareness that state-led reforms were insufficient. Kim emphasizes that Korean women's movements from 1896 onward were not simply imitations of Western feminism but practical adaptations of nationalist ideology to the domestic sphere.²⁷² These women recognized that political sovereignty and gender liberation were intertwined, each dependent upon the dismantling of hierarchical systems of domination, both foreign and domestic.

By the early 1920s, Korea's women's movement had developed into an organized intellectual network linking schools, newspapers, and associations. Yet its origins remained rooted in the unresolved tensions of the 1890s. The Kabo Reforms had promised equality but delivered conditional freedom. Their legal framework reflected the ideological compromises of a society caught between Confucian patriarchy, colonial subjugation, and nationalist revival. Within these constraints, Korean women forged an activism that was neither purely Western nor wholly traditional, but uniquely hybrid moral, pragmatic, and persistently self-critical. In this sense, the women's reform movement between 1870 and 1920 represents one of the most intellectually rich yet misunderstood transformations in East Asian history. It illustrates how legal and institutional change alone cannot ensure liberation without a parallel transformation in

²⁷¹ Hye-sŏk Na, "Modern Woman and Morality," *Sin Yŏja* [New Woman] 1 (1920); 5–6.

²⁷² Kim, "Under the Mandate of Nationalism," 123.

moral consciousness and social relations. The early Korean feminists understood this deeply: their activism was not merely about rights, but about redefining what it meant to be human in a rapidly modernizing, colonized world.

The Moral Economy of Reform and the Emergence of the “New Woman” (1910–1920)

By the 1910s, women’s activism in Korea had shifted from fragmented reform efforts to a more unified moral and national cause. The “New Woman” (신여성, *Sin Yŏsŏng*) became both an emblem of modernization and a site of tension between colonial impositions and indigenous reform agendas. While Confucian patriarchy continued to define women as moral anchors of the household, the new discourse of modernity, shaped by Christianity, education, and nationalism, transformed that moral authority into public activism. In other words, women’s activism during this period began to reflect a *moral economy of reform*, where the boundaries between national duty, spiritual integrity, and gendered virtue were deliberately blurred to advance reform under colonial conditions.

The “New Woman” was not simply a mimicry of Western feminist models, but rather an adaptation of global ideas to the Korean experience of colonization and resistance. Hyaeweol Choi argues that the New Woman was both an icon of progress and a symbol of apprehension, caught between the desire for modernization and the fear of moral decline under foreign influence.²⁷³ Publications such as *Sin Yŏja* (New Woman, 1917) and *Yŏsŏng* (Woman, 1920) reflected this duality, articulating women’s empowerment through education, yet grounding that empowerment in moral nationalism rather than individual liberalism. Women activists and

²⁷³ Choi, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea*, 112.

writers of this generation, most notably Na Hye-sök, Kim Hwal-lan (Helen Kim), and Kim Won-ju (also known as Kim Iryöp) embodied this transformation.

Educated in mission schools and influenced by both Western feminism and Korean nationalism, they represented the intellectual offspring of the late-Joseon reformers and early Christian educators. Helen Kim's vision of education as both spiritual and civic duty clearly reveals this tension. As Haesong Park explains, Helen Kim's advocacy for women's education was a Christian feminist project that simultaneously empowered women and aligned with Syngman Rhee's nationalist vision.²⁷⁴ Her willingness to compromise with political authority demonstrates how women's activism was not only an act of resistance but also an act of negotiation within overlapping systems of power.

This period also marked a significant turning point in the *language* of activism. Earlier appeals, such as the 1896 "Circular for the Establishment of a Girls' School," had framed women's education as a service to the family and nation. By the 1910s, however, rhetoric had shifted toward individual self-realization and social participation. Na Hye-sök, in her 1918 essay "A Study on Women's Problem," challenges dissenters with the sentiment that if we are to reform our nation, we must first reform our women.²⁷⁵ This assertion captured the broader intellectual shift from benevolent reformism to assertive activism. Yet, as Chungmoo Choi reminds us, such activism remained inseparable from the national agenda, where female emancipation was often justified by its contribution to collective liberation rather than personal autonomy.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁴ Park, "Christian Feminist Helen Kim," 9.

²⁷⁵ Hye-sök Na, "A Study on Women's Problem," *Sin Yöja* [New Woman], 1918.

²⁷⁶ Choi, "The Discourse of Decolonization," 20.

The emergence of the *Sin Yŏsŏng* figure must therefore be seen as the culmination of a half-century of women's reform rooted in Confucian ethics, transformed by Christian education, and reshaped by colonial modernity. Women activists strategically redefined virtue, from domestic chastity to civic virtue, while preserving the moral legitimacy necessary to act within a patriarchal and colonized society. The early twentieth century's "New Woman" movement thus represented not the birth of Korean feminism in the Western sense, but rather the evolution of a moral and intellectual tradition that reimagined what it meant to serve both gender and nation.

Conclusion

The story of women's activism in Korea between 1870 and 1920 is not one of linear progress, but of negotiation, adaptation, and partial liberation. While modern historiography often celebrates this period as Korea's feminist awakening, the reality is more complex. As scholars such as Kim and Hyaewol Choi show, women's reforms emerged not in isolation but through the interplay of nationalism, religion, and colonial discourse. The state and male reformers framed women's emancipation as an instrument for national survival, and thus, women's activism was permitted only insofar as it served those larger agendas. Yet within those constraints, women transformed moral and intellectual spaces into sites of subtle resistance.

Their activism drew upon the moral authority long assigned to women under Confucianism, reconfiguring that virtue into a language of reform. By entering public life through education, publication, and civic organizations, these women laid the foundation for future generations of Korean feminists who would challenge both patriarchy and empire. Ultimately, the late Joseon and early colonial periods witnessed an *unfinished liberation*: one that empowered women to enter the modern sphere but also bound them to a nationalist morality that continued to measure their worth through service to the collective. As the "New Woman"

emerged after 1910, she carried both the promise of progress and the burden of continuity, reflecting Korea's broader struggle to reconcile tradition, modernity, and freedom in the shadow of empire.

Conclusion

The period between 1870 and 1920 in East Asia marked a critical juncture for women's social, intellectual, and political transformation. Across Japan, China, and Korea, women resisted the constraints of patriarchy while navigating the paradoxes of modernization through education, print culture, and national reform. This conclusion integrates the experiences of women in these three regions, highlighting both the unique national contexts and the shared intellectual, cultural, and transnational frameworks that shaped their individual experiences. By comparing these movements, we can trace patterns of agency, reformist strategies, and feminist thought that link women across borders while acknowledging the differences within politics, colonial interferences, and social challenges.

In China, the collapse of the Qing dynasty, the rise of revolutionary movements, and the disquiet surrounding the May Fourth Movement created an environment in which women actively questioned the benefits of the traditional Confucian practices. Figures such as He-Yin Zhen, Chen Hengzhe, and Tang Qunying advocated education, political participation, and legal reforms intended to support women's emancipation.²⁷⁷ In Japan, modernization during the Meiji and Taishō periods provided opportunities for education and social activism, despite the legal restrictions and social expectations that constrained women's participation.²⁷⁸ Activists such as Raichō Hiratsuka and educators influenced by Yukichi Fukuzawa championed literacy and personal growth as avenues towards liberation.²⁷⁹ In Korea, women navigated Confucian

²⁷⁷ Zhen, *Tianyi Bao*, 89.

²⁷⁸ Mackie, *Creating Socialist Women in Japan*, 45.

²⁷⁹ Fukuzawa, *An Encouragement of Learning*, 12.

traditions, missionary influence, and Japanese colonial rule to assert their rights in education, political life, and social reform.²⁸⁰ Figures like Na Hye-sŏk and Kim Hwal-lan would employ nationalist, Christian, and feminist discourses as a means of encouragement towards advancing a woman's social standing and her participation.²⁸¹

Despite these differing and often complicated paths, a closer examination reveals shared concentrations and strategies. Education, literacy, and print culture emerged as necessary tools for self-improvement, moral instruction, and national engagement. Women across the region engaged with both Western ideas and regional intellectual currents to communicate their visions of modern womanhood. The intersections of feminism and nationalism reveal a complex, transnational dialogue of alternative modernization in which East Asian women were active participants rather than passive recipients of external influence. These were women who found ways to express themselves and, through courageous rhetoric, shared their determination in the hope of inspiring other women.

Comparative Themes and National Contexts

Education would become universally recognized as the foundation for social reform and, by extension, women's emancipation in East Asia. In China, reformers like Chen Hengzhe and Jin Qiu argued that educating women was crucial not only for individual empowerment but also for the nation's moral and political vitality.²⁸² Chen Hengzhe emphasized the importance of a curriculum that combined ethical cultivation with civic consciousness, asserting that educated women would nurture and inspire citizens capable of participating in national reconstruction.

²⁸⁰ Hye-sŏk, essays in *Sin Yeoja* and *Hankuk Ilbo*.

²⁸¹ Hye-sŏk, essays in *Sin Yeoja* and *Hankuk Ilbo*.

²⁸² Hengzhe, "Women's Education," 64.

Similarly, Liang Qichao's notion of the new citizen mother framed women as central to the reproduction of a modern, patriotic citizenry.²⁸³

Japanese reformers, while also prioritizing education, often framed it within moral and aesthetic expectations. The Meiji and Taishō periods saw the institutionalization of women's schooling, where literacy, hygiene, domestic skills, and moral instruction formed the core curriculum.²⁸⁴ Figures such as Yukichi Fukuzawa went beyond this stance and advocated for education that emphasized rational thinking and civic engagement while also cultivating women's moral sensibilities.²⁸⁵ Raichō Hiratsuka and her contemporaries, through publications like *Seitō*, encouraged critical engagement through literature, art, and social issues, linking intellectual cultivation to personal liberation and cultural refinement.²⁸⁶

Korean women navigated an even more complex educational terrain, shaped by Confucian traditions, missionary influence, and Japanese colonial policies. Mission schools such as Ewha Haktang provided both literacy and moral instruction, blending Christian ideals with nationalist sentiment.²⁸⁷ Reform-minded Korean women such as Na Hye-sōk leveraged these institutions to critique traditional gender hierarchies while advocating for a woman's ability to participate in community and creative endeavors.²⁸⁸ The dual pressures of colonial regulation and nationalist expectation meant that education became both a site of constraint and a space of opportunity for placing confinements on a woman's social presence.

²⁸³ Qichao, "On the New Citizen Mother," 87.

²⁸⁴ Koyama, *Ryōsai Kenbo*, 45.

²⁸⁵ Fukuzawa, *An Encouragement of Learning*, 1:4.

²⁸⁶ Hiratsuka, *Seitō*, 58.

²⁸⁷ Gamewell, *Missionary Education in Peking*, 44.

²⁸⁸ Hye-sōk, "On Women's Education."

Across all three regions, the discourse on women's education reflects a shared belief in the transformative potential of learning. Education was positioned as a means of moral self-improvement that would lead to social participation and national service. Yet local conditions, colonial rule in Korea, revolutionary upheaval in China, and modernization within a sovereign Japan produced unique pedagogical approaches and priorities. This comparative perspective highlights how reformist strategies were both context-specific and regionally resonant.

Print Culture and the Formation of Women's Public Voice

Print media emerged as the first critical space where a women engaged in both social and intellectual discourse. In China, periodicals such as *New Youth*, *Funü Shibao*, and *Tianyi Bao* provided platforms for debates about education, civic duty, and gender equality.²⁸⁹ Activists, including He-Yin Zhen, Tang Qunying, and Chen Hengzhe, used these journals to criticize patriarchal norms, advocate for legal reforms, and challenge cultural conventions that did not serve women.²⁹⁰ These publications provided women opportunities to speak publicly but also to construct networks of solidarity across urban and regional spaces, creating a pro feminist public sphere with other like-minded individuals.

In Japan, women leveraged literary journals such as *Seitō* to challenge traditional beliefs and social roles.²⁹¹ The journal's contributors emphasized literary experimentation, moral discourse, and feminist critique, drawing attention to women's intellectual and creative capabilities. By linking personal expression to broader social reform, Japanese women activists created spaces for debate and reflection that complemented formal educational initiatives.²⁹²

²⁸⁹ Judge, *Republican Lens*, 24–27.

²⁹⁰ Zhen, *Tianyi Bao*, 89.

²⁹¹ Hiratsuka, *Seitō* (Tokyo, 1911).

²⁹² Mackie, *Feminism in Modern Japan*, 58

Korean women similarly used print culture to negotiate social reform and national identity. Periodicals like *Sin Yeoja* and *Yeojeong* provided an opportunity for reformers to discuss issues of women's education, civic responsibility, and cultural preservation under Japanese colonial supervision.²⁹³ Print media thus functioned not merely as an outlet for literary expression but as a medium through which women could assert social authority, distribute reformist ideas, and engage in transnational intellectual exchange.

The shared emphasis on print culture showcases the interconnectivity of East Asian women's movements. Journals and newspapers became opportunities for dialogue, translation, and the circulation of feminist thought, allowing women to learn from, critique, and adapt ideas across borders. This transnational dimension demonstrates that women's intellectual agency in one country often resonated in another, creating overlapping spheres of discourse that were both comparative and collaborative.

Negotiating Modernity: Agency, Constraint, and Social Reforms

Women's activism during this period reflects the tensions between opportunity and limitation. Chinese feminists connected women's liberation to national reform, challenging imbedded patriarchal hierarchies and advocating for legal, educational, and meaningful social changes.²⁹⁴ He-Yin Zhen argued for the dismantling of class and gender oppression simultaneously, expressing that a genuine vision of equality would encompass both personal emancipation and societal transformation.²⁹⁵ Japanese women operated within a more constrained legal and social environment, yet they found avenues for empowerment through

²⁹³ Hye-sök, "On Women's Education,"

²⁹⁴ Zhen, *Tianyi Bao*, 71.

²⁹⁵ Zhen, *Tianyi Bao*, 91.

culture, education, and literary critique.²⁹⁶ Hiratsuka Raichō's editorial work in *Seitō* exemplifies this strategy: by engaging with literature, women could assert intellectual authority and public presence without directly challenging state or legal structures.²⁹⁷

Korean women, meanwhile, navigated dual pressures of colonial control and nationalist aspirations. Activists like Na Hye-sōk and Kim Hwal-lan strategically employed Christian, feminist, and nationalist discourses to advance education, social reform, and civic participation.²⁹⁸ Their activism highlights how colonial pressures can both restrict and create new opportunities for agency, fostering diverse forms of resistance. Across these regions, education, print culture, and community involvement were the primary means by which women negotiated modernity. Despite differences in legal frameworks, colonial pressures, and cultural expectations, women across East Asia actively shaped their social worlds, forging networks of intellectual exchange and reformist action that transcended national boundaries.

Expanding Comparative Insights

The comparative lens also reveals a merging of women's images of the “modern woman.” Across China, Japan, and Korea, women were encouraged to cultivate literacy, moral refinement, and civic awareness, positioning themselves as both agents of personal transformation and contributors to national renewal.²⁹⁹ While their pathways differed, China emphasized revolutionary citizenship, Japan emphasized cultural and moral cultivation. Korea negotiated colonial and nationalist pressures; the underlying aspiration for intellectual and social self-fashioning remained constant.

²⁹⁶ Hiratsuka, *Seitō*, 58.

²⁹⁷ Hiratsuka, *Seitō*, 58.

²⁹⁸ Judge, *Republican Lens*, 24–27.

²⁹⁹ Judge, *Republican Lens*, 24–27.

Moreover, these regional comparisons highlight the importance of transnational networks and intellectual exchanges that took place. Reformist ideas traveled across borders via translations, journals, and missionary education, allowing women in one context to engage with, reinterpret, and sometimes challenge ideas from another.³⁰⁰ This transnational conversation acknowledges that East Asian women were not isolated actors but participants in a dynamic, regionally interconnected dialogue about gender, modernity, and nationhood. By situating women's reform movements within these comparative frameworks, scholars can better understand both the diversity and the commonality of feminist aspirations in East Asia. The interplay between local conditions and transnational ideas illuminates the complexity of women's activism and underscores the importance of studying these movements comparatively rather than in isolation.

Beyond the Nation: Transnational Feminist Networks and Shared Modernities

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the emergence of shared intellectual and cultural frameworks linking women's activism across East Asia. Print culture, missionary education, and debates over citizenship created a shared vocabulary for envisioning modern womanhood, despite divergent political and social conditions. Scholars such as Lydia Liu, Gail Hershatter, and Vera Mackie emphasize how transnational networks, mediated by language and translation, facilitate regional dialogue on gender, nation, and modernity.³⁰¹ Education remains the most agreed-upon critical central platform for transnational exchange.

³⁰⁰ Hye-sök, "On Women's Education."

³⁰¹ Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 45.

Reformers across Japan, China, and Korea articulated strikingly similar goals: literacy, moral cultivation, and preparation for national service.³⁰² These educational strategies were adapted to local realities but shared the overarching aim of producing women capable of contributing to meaningful societal changes. Transnational circulation of texts, periodicals, and ideas also fostered intellectual solidarity. Translational practices also allowed women in one region to interpret, adapt, and challenge ideas from another, producing a dynamic discourse of translingual modernity.³⁰³ The nature of this discourse did not yield uniform feminism but a complex, regionally inflected dialogue where Chinese women debated Japanese models, Japanese women engaged with Western theories, and Korean reformers adapted both considering colonial conditions.

The historiographical contributions of key scholars illuminate these interconnections. Gail Hershatter situates Chinese women within revolutionary and social transformations; Joan Judge emphasizes periodicals as forums for feminist debate; Vera Mackie highlights Japanese activism under imperial and socialist frameworks; and Hyaeweol Choi traces Korean women's negotiation of colonial and missionary influences.³⁰⁴ Together, these studies reveal overlapping intellectual, social, and political dynamics, demonstrating that East Asian women constructed frameworks for gender equality long before legal reforms could institutionalize them.

Japanese, Chinese, and Korean Women in Comparative Perspective

A comparative analysis of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean women between 1870 and 1920 offers a historical lens through which to see how they both diverge and converge in pursuit

³⁰² Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 45.

³⁰³ Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 211–212.

³⁰⁴ Hershatter, *Women and China's Revolutions*, 112.

of women's equality. National circumstances shaped the possibilities and limits of reform, yet education, print culture, and civic discourse created shared platforms for negotiating modern womanhood. Across East Asia, women engaged with discourses encompassing morality, citizenship, and national service, forging intellectual networks that transcended borders. The experiences of Chinese women reveal the interconnectedness of education, feminist activism, and political reform. Individuals such as He-Yin Zhen and Tang Qunying demonstrate how women diligently challenged patriarchal and imperial hierarchies, linking personal emancipation to national liberation.³⁰⁵ In Japan, activists like Hiratsuka Raichō navigated the constraints of legal and social systems, emphasizing cultural, moral, and aesthetic pathways to empowerment.³⁰⁶ Korean women, under colonial and nationalist pressures, strategically combined Christian, feminist, and nationalist discourses to assert their social presence.³⁰⁷

Ultimately, these movements illustrate a shared intellectual horizon: women across East Asia utilized education, print culture, and civic engagement to redefine modernity. Their efforts reveal sophisticated understandings of gender, citizenship, and nation, highlighting a regional feminist consciousness that transcended national borders while remaining deeply rooted in local realities. The transnational, comparative perspective acknowledges the importance of studying East Asian women as active architects of modernity, revealing the enduring legacies of their reformist, intellectual, and activist projects.

³⁰⁵ Zhen, *Tianyi Bao*, 44.

³⁰⁶ Hiratsuka, *Seitō*, 58.

³⁰⁷ Hye-sŏk, *Yeoseong*.

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