

A Development of the “Jinbo” Women’s Movement in Korea Since the 1980s

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This paper examines the dynamics of the emergence of feminist activism with a case of the contemporary Korean feminist movement. It particularly focuses on feminist movement’s relationship to broader social movements and the Korean state as it has shaped the identity and strategy of feminist politics. It examines how and why Korean feminist movement emerged during the democratization movement and how Korean feminist movement has established itself as an autonomous political actor in enlarged civil society in the post-authoritarian era.

Key Words: women’s movement, feminist movement, Korean women’s organizations, KWAU, feminist identity, “Jinbo” (Progressive-ness)

Introduction

The stuffed office of the Korean Women’s Associations United (KWAU hereafter) near the old city center of Seoul in 2004 preserved the ambience of serious underground activities of the 1980s. Filled with stacks of books and documents, the office was bustling with several staffs brainstorming on how to make more attention-grabbing pickets for a sit-in demonstration. The sit-in street demonstration was not organized by the KWAU, but the KWAU was going to join the demonstration that afternoon in order to support the main demonstration organizer, labor union. The old building in which several other “progressive” women’s organizations occupy each floor seems to provide a quick glimpse at the way how the KWAU works in Korean society: ‘Together Yet Separately.’

A vast literature on women and politics has been dealing with women’s activism in various societies in recent years*. Those studies show that women’s activism in many societies appeared as a part of large-scale social movements or revolutionary movements: national liberation, human rights movements, democratization of authoritarian regimes. Participation in this broad range of struggles is often followed by the recognition of gender-specific grievances and concerns (Basu et al. 1995; Udayagiri 1995; Molyneux 1988, 2001; Waylen 1994). In those struggles for broad

* For example, see (Smith 2000; Basu et al. 1995; Jaquette and Wolchik 1998; Molyneux 2001; Alvarez 1990)

social transformation, however, ‘bigger’ social problems such as democratization, revolution, and anti-racism subsume, if not deny, women’s gender interests (Eisenstein 1984; Evans 1980; Gilmartin 1995; Vargas 1992; Cho and Kim 1995). Women are assigned “women’s work” such as making coffee and typing. Their male comrades frequently criticize gender specific concerns too “womanly” , “down-to-earth” , and working against large social goals (Cho and Kim 1995). Contemporary Korean feminist movements emerged in this kind of tension with then the anti-regime political struggle of which women’s groups were important part. This tension and the strained relationship between women’s movement and other social movement groups regarding gender norms, movement goals and strategies led to the break-up of women’s groups from larger scale social movements in search for their own identity as “women/feminist movement” in the 1980s.

In this paper, I revisit the question of the emergence of feminist activism with a case of the contemporary Korean feminist movement. In particular, this paper focuses on feminist movement’s relationship to broader social movements and the Korean state as it has shaped the identity and strategies of Korean feminist politics. It examines how and why Korean feminist movement emerged during the democratization movement and how Korean feminist movement has established itself as an autonomous political actor in enlarged civil society in the post-authoritarian era.

In the following sections, I will demonstrate that the relationship of the Korean women’s groups to the state and broad social movements has strongly influenced the ways in which Korean feminist movement emerged to forge its movement identity. When new Korean women’s groups formed and participated in the democratization movement during the 1980s, they defined their collective identity as *Kich’ung* (oppressed class at the bottom of the economic hierarchy, such as manual workers, the urban poor, and manual agricultural laborers). It was argued that the women’s movement should strive to liberate women of the oppressed class who suffered most from both capitalism and patriarchy. Since democratization in 1987, those ‘progressive’ women’s groups have gone through years of internal debates among member groups as to redefine their movement identity based on “women in general,” that would incorporate diverse women’s demands and interests. In the early 1990s, feminist organizations withdrew their membership from the ‘older People’s Movement (*Minjung Undong*, 民衆運動)¹’ whose primary goal was still class struggle, and instead joined the new citizen’s movement organizations that came to form the dominant voices in Korean civil society. Democratization opened up new possibilities for the feminist organizations to redefine their collective identity as feminist movement, different from its old identity as a partial movement within the confines of a larger class struggle. Yet it has also brought about new challenges to the feminist organizations since the 1990s. The feminist movement has become diverse and conflicting among themselves in need of collective struggle to preserve its independent feminist identity vis-à-vis other civil society organizations and the new democratic state.

Searching for a Feminist Movement Identity

In this section, I examine the origins of the feminist movement in the early 1980s and its incessant search for an independent women's movement identity under the pressure of larger male-centered social movements. I argue that the Korean feminist movement developed through its particular relationship with the People's Movement during the authoritarian regimes. However, overtime, such a relationship created a rift within feminist organizations over which issue should get movement priority, class struggle or gender equality.

State-Society Relations in Pre-democratization Period

In the early 1980s, prior to democratization in 1987, an organized feminist movement in Korea began to form, but only as part of a larger social struggle for political democratization and the liberation of the working class. Unlike Latin American countries where the transition to democracy occurred during periods of economic hardship and the structural adjustment policies that followed, Korea continued its unprecedented rates of high growth throughout the 1980s. Continuous economic growth for two decades resulted in a reconfigured class structure, with an increase in the middle class population and the emergence of the male-centered working class (Hsiao and Koo 1997). Such structural change in a mature economy threatened the employment of female laborers who had toiled in the initial stages of industry's capital accumulation. As Korea shifted its development policy from labor-intensive industrial development, which had relied heavily on cheap female labor, to heavy industry-centered development, companies laid off a massive number of women workers when many production sites were closed. Women workers fiercely resisted this threat to their jobs and began to organize labor unions to protect their work (Kim 1997; Pak 2004). However, their resistance met severe state's repression, as the regime was increasing its repression of all oppositional political activities.

To help women workers organize labor unions, radicalized student activists attempted to reach out to factory workers by infiltrating factories disguised as workers (Kim 1997; KWAU 1998). Young female intellectuals who studied labor law and early ideas of feminism also participated in the labor movement, particularly by teaching workers' rights in a limited number of public education organizations.² Based on their understanding of labor rights and the Marxist theory of political economy, women labor activists under the harsh suppression of the authoritarian regimes came to an understanding that the class nature of the state and the divided class structure of the haves and the have-nots deprived workers of their rights. Young women activists' observation of women workers' experiences as an exploited class and their participation in the labor movement during this period became an important cornerstone of the feminist movement in the early 1980s in self-defining the women's movement as that of the oppressed women.

In addition to the androcentric nature of the economic structure, the division of the Korean peninsula into North and South Korea created a particular political condition that differs from

other countries. Exacerbated by the global Cold War until 1989, the specific conditions of a divided nation still technically at war³ justified a strong military regime as indispensable for the defense of South Korea against the communist advance from the North. The enmity between the two Koreas led to militarizing of the whole nation with the conscription of male citizens for three years and more than 30% of the state budget spent on national defense. The state readily put down labor movements for the purpose of social stabilization since they appeared to be vulnerable to communist influence.

Citizenship in this kind of militarized society is highly gendered. Women were required to fulfill their traditional roles as mothers and wives while men served for their nation both in the military and at work. The state justified economic growth and strong authoritarian governance as methods to fulfill the urgent need for national survival; meanwhile, each regime put off democracy (Moon 2002, 2005).

This violent suppression by the state of Korean society from the colonial period up to the 1980s shaped the relationship between the state and society into a violent antagonism. In response to the violent repression by the state, civil society also confronted the state with an all-out militant struggle. Moon, in her study of the Korean women’s movement, stresses the impact of violence used to suppress civil society on women’s participation in civil society. She argues,

Violence as method of anti-regime struggle augmented the scale of violence on both sides that kept women at the margin of the political struggle... The violent relationship between civil society and the state under the political conditions of military authoritarian rule and national division further accentuated the masculinization of the public sphere and thereby further discouraged women’s access to it during the pre-1988 period. This process reflects the gender norms in Korean society that associate physical violence with masculinity, condoning and even encouraging men’s use of force. (Moon 2002: 482)

Ironically, the anti-regime social movement emulated the methods the authoritarian regime used to fortify its power. In anti-regime social movement groups, members commonly used military terms to express their warring spirit and sincere devotion to the “war” against an unjust political regime. They adopted the most rigid version of orthodox Marxist theory somewhat uncritically as a theoretical tool to prescribe the nature of Korean society and the method of struggle. Vanguard-ism and self-sacrifice in the struggle romanticized militant male activists, as if they were soldiers giving their lives to the righteous war against an anti-democratic power (Moon 2002).

I argue that this historically specific androcentric structure of state and society relations in Korea led to the development of particular forms of the women’s movement and its identity problems. In this militant social struggle where the activists’ “parochial” self-interests need to be sacrificed for the grand goal of the anti-regime movement, the movements emphasized unity and cooperation. This general goal dominated the strategy and identity of the women’s movement in an atmosphere of full dedication and sacrifice. Activists saw separating out women’s

interests from larger social movements as being against their moral responsibility of dedication to democracy. The Korean feminist movement emerged out of this acute tension between their position within the Leftist activists' groups called the People's Movement and women's pursuit of an independent movement identity. However, as I demonstrate in next section, the Korean feminist movement eventually set out on their independent path as a result of struggles against both the androcentric authoritarian state and social movement groups.

Kich'üng (oppressed class) Women's Movement: Women's Problem as Subject to the Nationalist Democratic Struggle

The political climate in the pre-transition period provided the women's movement with only limited public space. There was virtually no legally acknowledged political space other than the existing state-managed women's organizations and some religious activities. Nonetheless, three groups of feminist women's activism formed: women's human rights movement in churches, the women's labor movement, and the intellectuals and the college women's movement on campus. This coincides with the emergence of the early Latin American women's movements centered around human rights, popular urban community-based movements focused on consumer issues, and academic feminist groups. Unlike the Latin American cases, however, the higher level of economic development led to a strong labor movement in Korea. This is also different than the Japanese case where the early feminist movement was more influenced by radical feminism in the U.S, which focused on the liberation of female sexuality.

In Korea, Marxism was the most influential ideological underpinning of the democratization movement and, thus, women participants in this movement attributed the fundamental problem of sexual oppression to a polarized class structure deepened by Korea's rapid economic growth. Women activists viewed issues of women's liberation as secondary to the class struggle which they considered more fundamental. In this context, they argued that the women's movement should be of and for oppressed women, particularly, those manual workers at the lowest level of the class structure. In many authoritarian countries such as in Latin America, women mobilized around their traditional gender roles, particularly motherhood, as a strategic movement identity, primarily because the authoritarian regimes tolerated women's movements based on motherhood as politically less threatening (Rakowsky 2003; Jaquette and Wolchik 1998). Many women's groups emphasized their potential contributions to the nation as caring and unselfish mothers. Also in highly gendered liberal democracies such as Japan, many women's public and political activities are based on their housewife identity seen as more ethical (not corrupted) and caring (LeBlanc 1999; Uno 1993). In contrast to these examples, new Korean feminist organizations in this period repudiated traditional gender identities as oppressive to women by explicitly anchoring their movement's identity in oppressed women workers.

Employing Socialist Feminism and Marxist Feminism as ideological tools for diagnosing Korean women's subordination to the class structure and patriarchy, the first attempt to form an

independent women’s organization came with the establishment of the Women for Equality and Peace (*Yösöngpyöngwuhoe*, 女性平友会) in 1983, the new umbrella feminist organization⁴. The Women for Equality and Peace consisted of various newly formed feminist women’s groups, including the women’s divisions of the People’s Movement groups as well as groups which pursued an alternative women’s movement, independent of the ideology-driven social movements. The broad spectrum of the goals and ideological perspectives of member groups, however, presaged later conflicts among member organizations.

The founding principles of the Women for Equality and Peace hint at such conflicts among groups with different perspectives. The Women for Equality and Peace declared that the primary goal of the women’s movement is the transformation of the social structure (class structure) that created gender discrimination. The transformation of this gendered class structure can be achieved through three separate sub-goals: reforming the gender-discriminatory culture, building a society where men and women live equal lives based on each other’s cooperation, and striving for the reunification of South and North Korea (*Yösöngpyöngwuhoe* 1984). The first two goals and the last one do not seem connected, in fact they seem to be contradictory when building short-term movement strategies. However, the association put the same emphasis on the reunification of two Koreas as on reforming the gender discriminatory culture and building a new society to accommodate various groups’ different views on the origin of women’s subordination. They attributed the origin of gender discrimination to the Korean patriarchal culture, an economic structure that heavily relies on an unequal, gendered division of labor (women’s cheap labor at work and unpaid labor at home), and the divided nation as a specific political situation that creates and reinforces such culture and economic structure. By placing its ultimate goal in social transformation, it differentiated its feminist women’s movement from the conventional women’s movement which had been quiescent and cooperative with the current political system. Its efforts to understand the specific structural conditions that kept Korean women in subordination led it to see the divided nation as one of the fundamental social problems that perpetuated Korean women’s subordinate social position.⁵ The methods to achieve these goals and the proper priority among the goals still remained an open question, however.

Participants in the early feminist movement paid keen attention to the class differences among women. This attention led to the question of who ought to be the main subjects of the women’s movement. The assumption was that the women’s movement could not encompass all the different women’s interests and that such an effort was not even desirable. The debate over the question of the proper subject of the women’s movement reached a temporary consensus that *Kich’üng* (oppressed class) women were the bedrock of the feminist movement. It was these *Kich’üng* women who bore the heaviest burden of the Korean political economic structure, such as patriarchy, political suppression, and class exploitation, and thus, they should be the catalysts for social transformation. Designating *Kich’üng* women as the main driving force of the women’s movement, feminist women’s organizations viewed oppressed women as having an independent

political agency to bring about social transformation. Such an attempt was a meaningful departure from the dominant forms of the middle-class women's movements which preserved an elite women's leadership role in the women's movement.

Maintaining their focus on gender issues, the Women for Equality and Peace politicized gender-specific social problems, one of which was domestic violence as a crime in the private sphere. Within the Association, however, member organizations found it hard to reconcile the different positions and demands of the diverse women's groups. Although member organizations shared the urgency of the democratization struggle, they did not necessarily reach an agreement on immediate strategies and on a desirable relationship with the general (male-centered) democratization movement. In fact, not every woman could risk her life and responsibilities to her family by participating full-time in the then illegal democratization struggle. While the women's divisions of the people's movement groups insisted on a hard-line, these more "moderate" women's groups wanted an independent women's movement rather than one subordinate to democratization struggle. This disagreement on its position in a large anti-authoritarian social movement resulted in the dissolution of the women for Equality and Peace in the following years. Member organizations, instead, went back to focus on independent activities in their specialized areas while maintaining an informal network with other women's groups.

The feminist movement's second attempt to form a larger and more inclusive association of women's groups began when a student disguised as worker, Kwon Insook, exposed to the public her shocking experience of sexual torture, administered under police custody in 1987. The victim was a prototype of the radicalized student activists in the 1980s who worked disguised as manufacturing sector workers to help organize labor unions. The authoritarian regime was making a frantic search for those disguised student activists to put down rising labor activism and political insurgency. Kwon was just one of the thousands arrested during that time, but she was the only one determined to expose the extremely repressive nature of the authoritarian regime by testifying to the extent to which the authoritarian regime was using women's sexuality as an object of torture.

Astonished by this event, women's groups cooperated quickly to form an ad-hoc committee to tackle this sexual violence against women by the state. In cooperation with religious groups, they supported Kwon's legal battle in the courts and endeavored to educate the public on the state's violence against women. Through their cooperative experiences during this time, they strongly felt a need to form a permanent organization to organize their common struggles. They formed the Korean Women's Association United (韓国女性団体連合) in 1987 as a result of such a need. Thirty-three women's groups came together to launch an umbrella feminist organization. Member groups ranged widely in their special issue areas, from those of women workers, women farmers, housewives, religious women, to those of women environmentalists and academic feminists. The KWAU aimed at encompassing the diverse streams of the autonomous women's movements. In many aspects, the KWAU inherited the legacy of the Women for Equality and Peace; for example,

the founding principles of the KWAU show parallels with those of the Women for Equality and Peace. The first issue of ‘*Minju yōsōng* (democratic women, 民主女性)’, a journal published by the KWAU, declares,

A desirable women’s movement is not only in pursuit of the same rights as men’s, but rather strive for transforming the social structure that creates the repression of women...The women’s movement should establish itself firmly as an anti-foreign influence struggle for self-determination of our people, a democratization struggle and a struggle for gender equality against political oppression, and a livelihood rights struggle for dignified lives (of the working class women) as human beings. (KWAU 1987a: 2)

Writers in this first issue all voiced criticism of the existing women’s movements as exclusively middle-class women’s movements that had, in their view, ignored working-class women’s needs and privation. Putting the priority of the women’s movement on the anti-foreign and democratization struggle, they argued that the new women’s movement should focus on the elimination of the class structure that perpetuated the oppressed position of working-class women (KWAU 1992). It largely echoed the people’s movement. They further emphasized a coalition among ‘progressive’ (*Jinbo*, 進歩) women’s groups, and also between the women’s movement and the labor movement as a way to win women’s emancipation. The political urgency of the democratization struggle in the 1980s kept them focused on large social transformation, which it may conflict with the issues of various women’s identities and specific rights issues.

When the KWAU nominated Kwon Insook “Woman of the Year” in 1987 for her courage to reveal her excruciating experience and expose the patriarchal nature of the state, it also hailed her contribution in spurring a renewed women’s movement,

Even though she went through an incident so humanly unimaginable and nightmarish, she became a major force in opening numerous women’s eyes to the realities of the oppression of women, through her amazing moral courage and purity. She is one of the greatest pioneers in the women’s movement, who rallied women by making them realize the strength of their own awakened power. (KWAU 1987b: 8)

In response to that, however, Kwon replied with an emphasis on her class identity as female *worker* more than on her gender identity,

I want to say this when we interpret sexual torture itself. It is when we, women, reduce this incident to the mere resistance to a form of torture that puts pressure on the notion of chastity through rape or sexual molestation, or the interpretation as a cause for sympathy for me as an individual. The more important fact of the matter is that they used sexual molestation as torture against a female worker in order to suppress the labor movement. (Cho 1996: 148–149)

Kwon viewed the authoritarian regime’s oppression of women as a way to suppress labor movement, yet she strongly resisted the viewpoint that erases class in exchange for gender. This difference shown in KWAU’s statement and Kwon’s reply, regarding the class struggle as a method of women’s emancipation, revealed the old tension that had existed among many women activists

in the democratization movements.

The priority of class struggle over women's issues led both the Women for Equality and Peace and its successor organization, the KWAU up to the mid-1990s, to take an overtly critical stance toward the existing middle class women's movement. Both organizations were reluctant to cooperate with the middle-class women's groups and, moreover, strongly refused any forms of engagement with the state for negotiations which the middle-class women's organizations had relied on. Until the mid-1990s, when opposition leaders finally were elected to power, the People's Movement groups were reluctant to work with the state that they did not perceive as legitimate. In this view, even though the old government had been forced by the people's power to revise the Constitution to protect people's direct vote for the presidency, the new president elected under the new Constitution was the nominee of the old military regime, thus failing to transfer political power to democratic forces. The KWAU and the newly formed feminist organizations were largely in line with this stance up to the mid-1990s.

Distinguishing themselves from the traditional women's movements which, the KWAU argued, had represented the interests of middle-class women—largely educated middle-class professionals and housewives—the new feminist groups claimed that working-class women should be the catalysts for and the subjects of the women's movement. They prioritized economic justice and sexual violence over other issues, such as family law reform. When the KWAU reluctantly decided to join the family law reform movement, they did it largely for the proposed revision of the articles regulating women's economic status in the areas of inheritance and divorce. They argued that family law had functioned as justification for the exploitation of women's labor in the family through discriminatory inheritance and divorce law. The statement for family law reform that the KWAU publicized in 1989 epitomizes this view,

We must note that the family law article that stipulates household living expenses as husbands' responsibility ignores the reality where women work as hard as men in order to support her family. It is used to justify women's low wages by degrading women's labor and promoting the idea that women are dependent on husbands' protection and economically incompetent...So far, a small number of educated women have been the major actors in the family law reform movement; however, the catalysts for the women's movements should be women in mass, particularly, women laborers who are suffering from the gender discriminatory wages and women workers in agriculture who are tormented under double oppression (of class and patriarchy). (Yi 1992: 719)

In response to the Confucian conservatives who ardently sought to preserve the family head system—one of the central principles of Korean patriarchy—feminist women's groups suggested that they should place priority on the revision of articles that would have a direct effect on women's economic status over revision of the entire family law, including the abolition of the family head system (through this system, women are symbolically subordinate to the male family head). They gave priority to equal inheritance and distribution of property in the case of divorce.

For feminist women’s groups during this period, the family head system was only symbolic, and as such did not have material influence on women’s actual economic status.

From Kich’üng to ‘Women’: People’s Movement to Citizen’s Movement

Over the course of the early 1990s, the relationship of the KWAU and the People’s Movement grew uneasy and strained. Social movement and ‘progressive-ness’ in the 1980s were equated with the democratization struggle, but with the rise of ‘new’ civil society organizations that differentiated themselves from the anti-authoritarian People’s Movement groups, Korean civil society underwent a great diversification both in terms of ideological orientation and social movement goals. While new civil society organizations emphasized the non-violent methods of social movements and policy suggestions directed to state institutions, the People’s Movement groups continued their direct confrontation with a state which, in their view, still represented the capitalists’ interests. The KWAU went on to join the National Federation of Nationalistic and Democratic Movements, the renewed umbrella organization formed by reconvened anti-regime people’s movement groups in 1989 soon after the return to democracy.⁶ Facing criticisms from both People’s Movement groups for being passive and from moderate women’s groups for not putting a priority on women’s interests, however, the KWAU was pressed to redefine its identity, either as a subordinate part of the People’s Movement or as an autonomous women’s organization.

Democratization and the changing political climate during the 1990s opened new possibilities and provided different challenges to feminist organizations. Even after the return to institutional democracy in 1987, the former ruling party managed to remain in power for the next two terms of the presidency, until 1997, due to the opposition parties’ failure to nominate a united opposition candidate in the presidential elections. A long-time opposition leader, Kim Young Sam, even joined the old ruling bloc through the artifice of merging his party with the ruling party and was elected president in 1992. This relatively long process of transition provided many social movements groups and women’s groups with sufficient time to mobilize resources by adjusting their strategies to the changed political environment.⁷ Since President Kim Young Sam, successive presidents have been elected with popular support owing to the direct presidential election system. Unlike previous rulers, the power base of successive presidents within the ruling party was weak, which led them to seek social movement organizations as partners for popular support. Such partnerships and a developing institutional democracy opened new political opportunities and institutional channels to exert their direct influence on politics. The rehabilitation of institutional politics, especially political parties, indeed absorbed a great number of former social movement leaders. At the same time, in a formal democracy with a democratic constitution, militant street demonstrations and attempts at the overthrow of the government by force were no longer viewed as viable strategies, nor was the suppression of differences within movement groups in the interest of promoting unity. This changed political climate challenged the People’s Movement groups to reconsider their militant protests and ultimate goals.

The continuous making and unmaking of political parties throughout this period made it less likely for social movement groups to ally with a political party, leaving civil society relatively independent from the state. Direct relationships between social movement groups and government agents have characterized the South Korean state and society relationship since democratization. The state and civil society relationship, however, was more confrontational and uncompromising than cooperative. Social movement groups in coalition exerted great influence and pressure on the state in the direction of democratic reform (Kim 2002a).

In the wake of the changing political climate, the KWAU also began serious debates over their goals and strategies. A number of participants suggested that women's movement should move beyond the reductionism, economism, and exclusiveness which characterized the 1980s. While the majority of members still considered *Kich'ung* (the oppressed class) as the main driving force for the women's movement, the KWAU faced an important challenge from within (Kim 2002b; Yi 1998). At summer retreats in 1991 and 1992, a cautious awareness came that the women's movement had not been able to represent women's broader interests by focusing so rigidly on *Kich'ung* women. This sparked a heated debate among the participants. Reformists suggested that the women's movement should shift its attention to various women's social positions and needed to broaden its base beyond *Kich'ung* women. They also requested that the KWAU should strengthen its professional capacity in order to propose policy suggestions.

In fact, this move reflected the new practical challenges that the women's movement faced. First, the nature of women's labor has changed as industrial readjustment prompted light industries to move to other Asian countries in search of cheaper labor. The number of women production workers working collectively at manufacturing sites was dwindling while more women began to work as white-collar office workers or service workers. Women in service industries and office jobs worked in improved work environments compared to their elder sisters in the 1970s, yet they were still being subjected to sexual harassment and gender-based salary/promotion discrimination. The interests of the female working class were significantly diversified. Also, the growth of unionization and the legalization of union activities since democratization diminished the role of umbrella women's organizations in the labor movement as supporters for women workers' effort to organize unions. As the locus of the labor movement shifted to legalized labor unions themselves, the external support of the KWAU for unionization lost much of its significance.

These changes suggested that the KWAU should reconsider its role and its strategies for women's liberation in order to meet the new demands and challenges in the changing Korean society and political circumstances. Member organizations of the KWAU had already shifted their attention to these new demands by professionalizing their activities in specific issue areas. For instance, the Women's Hotline expanded its local branches to tackle inveterate domestic violence; the Korean Womenlink (*Yösöng minwuhoe*) endeavored to support office workers' rights; the Women Workers' Association (*Yösöng nodonja hyopuihoe*) launched diverse support programs for married women workers, and so on. While carrying out independent activities, member

organizations also worked collectively for the ‘politicization of gender,’ with such projects as campaigns against violence against women and issues surrounding the Comfort women through an international coalition with Japanese women. When the KWAU members debated whether it should continue to participate in the renewed People’s Movement in 1992, only four member organizations supported participation. It was a great change from 1989, when twenty-one out of twenty-four voted for the KWAU’s participation in the People’s Movement (Kang 2004; KWAU 1992).

Cautious as it was, the KWAU was looking into the possibility of separating itself from the People’s Movement. Prior to this event, a class-less term like ‘women’s common tasks’ had hardly ever appeared in the official writings published by the KWAU; now, it was moving in the direction of embracing the differences of women’s interests in all walks. It came to recognize the diverse sites of women’s lives, such as in the family, the environment, education, sexuality, and culture, where women have played important roles beyond the production sites. With a change in its leadership from symbolic senior figures to young activists with professional hands-on experiences in women’s issues, the KWAU began to step into areas requiring various policy suggestions which it used to neglect (Kang 2004). In 1993, when a new building secured an independent physical space for the women’s organizations, women’s groups ‘secured both their capacity and material conditions as an autonomous women’s movement’ (Moon 2002).

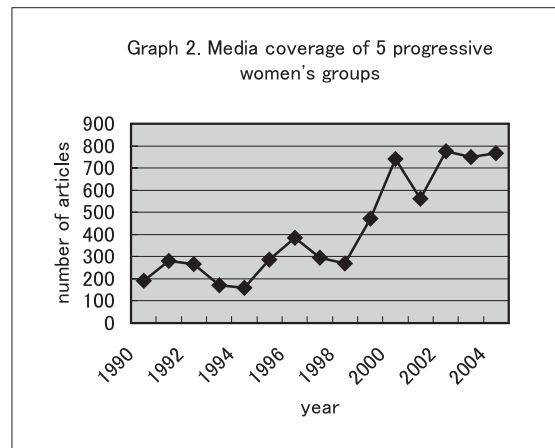
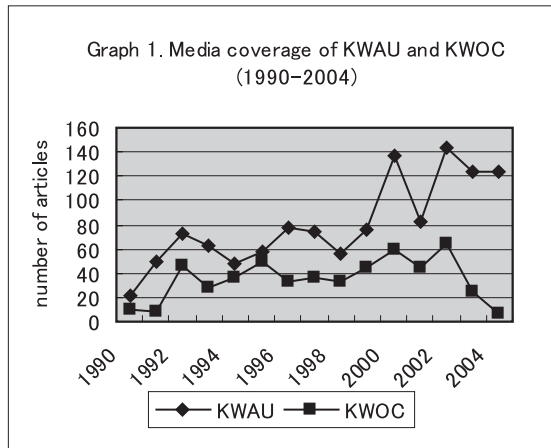
The KWAU’s cooperation with the people’s movement that culminated in 1989 was reshaped into one of ‘independent coalition,’ as it redefined its identity as an independent women’s organization. The KWAU has worked with the People’s Movement organizations depending on the issue areas, but kept its autonomous identity as a women’s organization. The slogan coined at that time, “Together Yet Separately,” represents the KWAU’s effort to balance its support for general social movements and its own pursuit of gender equality as an autonomous women’s movement. By this time, women’s organizations on both ends of the spectrum—women’s organizations that had opposed the KWAU’s class struggle and those that had strongly insisted on class struggle—withdraw their membership from the KWAU. The KWAU secured a more coherent ideological perspective among member groups and began to forge an identity as a *feminist* movement organization. It pursued ideological progressive-ness (*Jinbo*) and feminism, and advocated non-violent methods and cooperation with various civil society organizations. The KWAU has since expanded their movement to focus on the areas of sexuality, the environment, education, culture, reunification, and international peace, beyond a narrow focus on class struggle.

Deconstruction of Korean ‘Progressive-ness’ (*Jinbo*) Through ‘Women’s Experience’

In the context of the rise of new civil society organizations, the KWAU expanded its organizational structure to regions beyond the capital city of Seoul by setting up local offices to establish itself as a national feminist organization. Based on its broad organizational network and

the 'progressive' nature of the KWAU, the KWAU grew to be the epitome of the Korean feminist movement replacing the state-dependent traditional women's organizations.⁸ From around this time in the early 1990s, the KWAU began to reformulate its relationship with the state and new civil society organizations. The KWAU registered with the state as an incorporated body in 1995. Feminist women's organizations under the leadership of the KWAU shifted their attention to pressing the government for gender mainstreaming in public policies and new legislation for gender equality.⁹ As Moon observes, negotiation with the state replaced the antagonism that existed previously between dissident women's associations and the state and also the dominance that the state wielded over other traditional women's organizations (Moon 2002). Since then, the KWAU has begun to pay attention to local and national elections, so as to be able to influence legislation and policy-making processes. The KWAU and its local offices support women candidates at the local level and continuously lobby political parties for election law reform for better representation of women in the National Assembly. They successfully pushed political parties to introduce quotas for women candidates. As a result, the percentage of women legislators jumped to over 10% in the 2004 national election from 2.4% in the 1990s. At the same time, the KWAU permeated the state directly to promote rapid policy change and new legislation for women. It has participated in various committees of the government for input on policy-making and had two activist representatives of the Association join the government as cabinet ministers of the Ministry of Gender Equality.¹⁰ In lobbying for these reforms, the KWAU flexibly cooperated with various other women's groups, including traditional women's organizations, to form a coalition despite their ideological conflict. In fact, the sharp distinction between feminist women's organizations and the traditional women's organizations has become much less clear, at least in their rhetoric of gender equality.

In this way, the KWAU quickly grew to be one of the major Korean civil society groups. Korean newspaper coverage of women's groups increased dramatically over the last 15 years. Graph 1 shows the number of articles in two national dailies with any mention of the KWAU and the Korea Women's Organization Confederation (KWOC hereafter), an organization that traditional women's groups organized.¹¹ As clearly shown in graph 1, the KWAU has enjoyed a dramatic increase in appearances during the last decade while the KWOC, the confederation of conservative women's groups, remained stable in the extent of coverage throughout the 1990s and finally started to lose its prominence in the 2000s. This phenomenon coincides with increasing media attention to five progressive women's groups formed in the 1980s.¹² The progressive women's movement, indeed, appears to have "established itself as a definite social force with which the state has to reckon" (Moon 2002).



In social movement organizations in democratized Korea, “*Jinbo* (progressive-ness) replaced “democracy,” “nation,” “*Kich’ung* (oppressed class),” and “*Minjung* (people).” A renewed opposition between progressive and conservative forces now substituted for old opposition between democracy and authoritarianism. New civil society groups characterized as “*Jinbo*” advanced to form strong political power, exerting influence on government policies and appointments to major government positions. Their power culminated in the establishment of the standing committee of a broad civil society coalition, the Solidarity Network (*Siminsahoe yōndaehōeui*), among *Jinbo* civil society organizations on February 27th, 2001 (Cho 2004). *Jinbo* civil society groups work in coalition as if they were a powerful bloc against the conservatives and the state. The KWAU and other women’s groups joined it to be a part of the progressive forces. The coalition the KWAU makes with other civil society groups is based on its broad ideological movement identity as “*Jinbo*.”

Despite the dramatic rise of progressive women’s groups, however, organizing women did not bring the women’s movement in the new civil society much further beyond its marginalized position in the People’s Movement.

Newly organized ‘progressive’ (*Jinbo*) social movement groups in the late 1980s and 1990s apparently expressed their concerns over gender inequality. These new progressive groups, however, largely talked about gender to showcase their ‘progressive-ness.’ In reality, renowned leaders in progressive civil society groups and politicians were often accused of gender-blind attitudes and even sexual misconduct. Since the late 1990s, women in these groups began to challenge the androcentric nature of ‘Korean progressive-ness’.¹³ Korean feminists from diverse backgrounds have called for the reconstruction of ‘progressive-ness.’ They argue that gender equality should be constitutive of progressive-ness. Yoon, the representative of the Korean Womenlink, argues that the women’s movement is an inherently *Jinbo* (progressive) movement, so that the women’s movement should not be only for women, but for all the socially marginalized (Yoon 2004). In recent debates, member organizations of the KWAU reassert that the ultimate goal of the autonomous women’s movement is the fundamental change of society towards gender equality and for that reason women’s groups should not fall into interest group politics.

Confronting the continuing androcentric nature of civil society, the KWAU aims to deconstruct the ‘progressive-ness’ of civil society as still being androcentric and gender-blind. Feminist women’s groups and the KWAU participated in founding the Solidarity Network (*Simin sahoe danche yondae hoeui*) in 2001. The Solidarity Network is an institutional framework for fine-tuning in the different positions among various civil society groups and producing a concerted voice in civil society. Through such an institutional framework of new civil society, women’s groups have persuaded other ‘progressive’ groups to support gender-equal policy change since the gender perspective should be an essential element of *Jinbo*.¹⁴

Concluding Remarks

A view of women’s activism as one separate cycle of social movement ignores how civil society and social movements interact with women’s activism and how civil society and social movements function as a gendered terrain of politics. Women’s interests or the social movement’s collective identity are not determined simply by the objective nature of being women or socially dissident and neither is the emergence of a movement a by-product of the opened political opportunity structure or a simple reaction to it. Activists in social movements develop the movement identity through acute struggles and self-reflection in unique political structure and historical challenges and this internal dynamic often leads to the different strategies and goals that social movements pursue.

In this paper, I examined the tension between women’s activism and large social movements and highlight that the politics around the tension shaped the trajectory of women’s self-definition of the movement’s identity in the particular social context of democratization and its aftermath in Korea. I traced the Korean feminist struggle to forge its identity, from the *Kich’ung* women’s movement, to the umbrella women’s movement based on ‘women in general,’ and, finally, to a driving force for the reconstruction of Korean ‘progressive-ness.’ The KWAU moved beyond their subordinate position in the large social movement, forging a strong feminist identity and creating a network among member organizations throughout its struggle for an independent feminist organization. It also re-established itself as one of the prime progressive civil society organizations and increased its influence on the large civil society organizations that had a bargaining power over the state. This change in feminist movement identity and strategies led the KWAU to take up issues outside the narrow area of economic justice only, and to participate in the various policy areas including the renewed family law reform movement in the late 1990s. The shift of leadership from older middle-class women’s organizations to the KWAU brought about a great change in the dynamics of the gender politics in Korea since the 1990s due to the KWAU’s capability of mobilizing broad-scale civil society support and its bargaining power over the state.

Due to the rapid change of Korean society since its return to democracy, the “progressive” women’s movement epitomized by the KWAU is now seen as an old style feminist movement that has placed an excessive focus on institutional reform through “working with the state.” Recent

Korean feminist movements are tremendously diversified in size, scope, method, and ideology, from active feminist cyber-communities to the experiment of alternative feminist child-rearing. Creative forms of new networks and diverse feminist subjectivities have come to existence since the mid 1990s. This new generation of women’s movement differentiates themselves from both “progressive” and conservative women’s organizations, blurring the sharp distinction between ideological “progressives” and conservatives which characterized important nature of women’s activism in Korea. Young feminists who deny identity-based movements boldly declare that “women are the future of citizens’ movement.” It is still unclear how it is going to unfold. However, such continuous challenges to existing feminism and women’s movement call for on-going search for new feminist politics.

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Notes

- 1 The People’s Movement here indicates a resistant social movement that formed in pursuit of class liberation against the authoritarian state during the 1970s and 1980s. It developed into the formation of the Democratic Labor Party (民主労働党) in 2000. For more details of this movement, see (Kim 2000).
- 2 The Christian Academy in the 1970s provided an important space for intellectual exchange among those scholars who participated in the anti-authoritarian struggle. Young scholars who were members of the Christian Academy volunteered to open seminars and classes to the public as an alternative educational institute. Many labor activists in the 1970s and early 80s were participants in the programs offered by the Christian Academy
- 3 The Korean War stopped in 1953 with the treaty stipulating a temporarily suspension of war. The treaty is not a peace treaty for the end of war.
- 4 It is noteworthy that women activists at that time when the Women for Equality and Peace was established did not call themselves “feminists” nor their organization a “feminist organization.” Although nowadays the Women for Equality and Peace is viewed as socialist feminist movement, feminism was still associated with the Western women’s movement which Korean women suspected did not apply directly to Korean women’s situations.
- 5 Kim argues that these two ideological streams eventually ended up in the dominance of orthodox Marxism in parallel with the predominance of orthodox Marxism in general social movement groups. (Kim 2002b)
- 6 Political democracy was achieved in 1987 when the authoritarian ruler, Chun, bowed to the popular demand for democratization. A new Constitution was promulgated and Korean citizens were granted a right to elect their president. To the disappointment of social movement groups, however, the ruling party succeeded in re-electing its candidate in the following presidential election due to the failure of opposition parties to cooperate to put forward a single candidate.
- 7 Brazil underwent a similar, relatively long and elite-controlled transition process.
- 8 It is fair to use plural form for Korean feminist movements. Although my paper has focused on one kind of organized feminist movement, the KWAU, there are certainly a great variety of alternative feminist movements these days in Korea that I do not discuss in this paper.

- 9 Gender-mainstreaming is a policy suggestion of the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference that gender perspective should be incorporated in all kinds of and at all levels of public policy from agenda-setting to the analysis of policy outcomes.
- 10 The first and second cabinet ministers of the Ministry of Gender Equality (founded in 2001, renamed as Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in 2004) were Korea Women's Associations United representatives.
- 11 Each paper represents the opposite end of the ideological spectrum (the conservative *Chosun ilbo* and the progressive *Hangyore*).
- 12 The five organizations I collected this data on are the KWAU, the Korean Womenlink, the Women in Church Association, the Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center, and the Korea Women Workers' Confederation. Also the data collected here are from special sections in Seoul-based national dailies including politics, economy, society, and opinion.
- 13 One of the sensational events regarding the disclosure of the patriarchal nature of progressive groups was *100 people's committee's* confession of male activists' sexual misdeeds that they suffered.
- 14 The relationship with the state is also on debate regarding the autonomy question. Tentatively it is agreed that the representatives of women's organizations should not take government positions during their tenure in the organizations (Kim 2002b)

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