

The Rise of Women's Sport

And the Reconstruction of Gender Identity in South Korea

Research >
Korea

From the moment that modern sports was introduced during the Korean Imperial Age (1897-1910), Korean sport was dominated by the male population. This development was mainly a result of the strong Confucian tradition of the previous Chōsun dynasty (1392-1896). Confucian male chauvinism and gender stereotypes have since been disseminated to both men and women through the discriminative socialization of family and school, as well as through the biased coverage of mass media. As a result, a male-centred ideology was established, and the residual status of women in sport reinforced.

By Eunha Koh

Originally, the Buddhist religion played a central role in Korean culture, supplying its society with moral and religious values. When the Chōsun dynasty seized power from the Koryo dynasty in a revolution, the new power employed a 'respect Confucianism and oppress Buddhism' policy, suppressing spiritual culture of Koryo by severing the ties between Buddhism and society. Accordingly, Buddhism was reduced to a pure religion, while Confucianism resumed the central role in Korean society.

The new Chōsun dynasty employed the Sung Ri Hak school of Confucianism for the foundation of its social values. It originated in China, and had the most conservative character of all the various schools of Confucianism in existence at the time. Ironically, Sung Ri Hak has since become weaker in China, where it originated, almost to disappear during the Communist revolution. Nevertheless, it continues to exercise its influence over Korean society today. Sung Ri Hak strictly divided the domestic and social roles of men and women and spread the notion of 'predominance of men over women', defining womanhood as subordinate to manhood in general society. It separated the male and female domains of daily life under the rule that 'boys and girls over seven years old should never be in the same room', and restricted women from the opportunities of education. Moreover, the norms and rules of Confucianism produced the

female 'docile body', to use Foucault's term, by presenting detailed standards for bodily actions and behaviours.

Gender discrimination has been witnessed in every society; in Korea, however, this discrimination also worked to hide the female body from the public view. As a result, the participation of women in sports could not be reconciled with the social morals of bodily behaviours, or even the fashions, of early twentieth-century Korea. An attempt was made at the Ewha School, the first modern school for girls, where gymnastics were taught in the physical education classes. A first in Korean history, the programme received harsh criticism. Angry parents withdrew their daughters from the school, and the municipal government sent a notice demanding the end of the gymnastics programme. Notwithstanding the social barrier, Korean women were gradually exposed to various sports activities through such modern schools, and this, in turn, opened their eyes to new values of modernity. In this sense, it can be stated that modern sports helped to raise the social status of women in early twentieth-century Korea.

After the Korean War, the South Korean government began in earnest to promote elite sports as a means to enhance national prestige and encourage integration. Sport policies throughout the period of the 1960s until into the 1980s focused on achieving victories at international sporting events such as the Olympic Games. As female athletes began to earn victories in such traditional male sports as judo, handball, and most recently football, more girls and women began par-

ticipating not only in so-called feminine sports but also in aggressive or contact sports. This new direction in women's sports cannot be fully explained, however, by the naïve answer that the social recognition of these sports has changed. It is true that we witness more women participating in the sports they once eschewed; winning prizes at international events such as the Olympics, though, does not necessarily result in the growth of those sports into mass sports, or the conversion of traditional gender values attached to different forms of sport and physical activity. In Korea, it is the deliberate promotion and support of specific sports for specific events which lies at the heart of this phenomenon, since nationalism is the most important factor that shaped Korean sport into its present form.

'boys and girls over seven years old should never be in the same room'

With the rapid economic growth of the early 1990s, people grew more concerned about their health and quality of life. In response to this social need, the South Korean government also began to promote mass sports after the success of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. This social atmosphere resulted in the increase in participation in mass sports by both men and women. More girls and women now enjoy various sporting activities throughout the country. Successful female athletes such as Seri Pak, the world-famous golfer, have become role models for young girls. The healthy athletic body is being regarded as a new icon of female beauty. To some extent, sports has provided an opportunity to dismantle the conventional image of women and raise women's social status, thus contributing to reduce gender discrimination. It has not, however, broken the 'glass ceiling' of gender inequality inherent in Korean society. Women still tend to participate in socially approved non-aggressive or feminine sports such as aerobics, swimming, jogging, badminton, and golf. While a few female athletes and teams are successful, more female sports teams are in serious financial trouble, and many female athletes lack financial and social support. Furthermore, the media still tend to present female athletes as 'pretty dolls', concentrating on their appearance rather than their performance.

Leaving ideas of 'East' and 'West' aside, pre-modern gender stereotypes have built up social prejudices regarding sport, especially masculine or contact sports, and in turn have become serious obstacles to women's participation in sports. This is due to the notion that intense physical activity and frequent physical contact are not compatible with the feminine ideal. In Korea, it was the influence of Confucianism that led to a greater restriction of women's sport and physical activity than in Western countries. In other words: gender inequality or gender discrimination witnessed in the contemporary sports setting resulted more from pre-modern gender relations and the patriarchy latent in Korean society than from individual obstacles or a lack of opportunity. This is because modern sports itself has been transformed in the Korean context to include conventional gender relations, and has thus been encapsulated in Korean culture.

To date, sports in Korea is still often regarded as part of the male preserve, and the predisposition against women's sports has yet to be eliminated. Moreover, role conflict between traditional femininity and athletic accomplishment continues to burden female athletes. Female athletes in general, and those participating in masculine sports in particular, face both praise and censure at the same time. As many feminist sports scholars have asserted, however, gender equality in sports can be attained through the change of social recognition on gender relations; at the same time, the reconstruction of gender identity on society can be attained through the destruction of gender stereotypes in respective areas, including sports. ◀



Dr Eunha Koh is a visiting assistant professor at the University of Maryland at College Park, USA. She specializes on the sociology of body in sports and dance, as well as sports and gender.
E-mail: eunhakoh607@hotmail.com