

KOREAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES AND A STRUGGLE FOR HUMANIZATION

- A Presentation with A Dance -

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The Korean women have had the experience of injustice and dehumanization throughout the Korean history. I would like to present in two ways concerning of this subject: one is the Korean women's experiences with Korean traditional religion (or teaching) - Confucianism, and the other one is through the historical tragedy - Japanese occupation in Korea (1910-1945).

Since Yi dynasty (1392-1910), Confucianism has played a major role in degrading women's status in the Korean patriarchal society. I would like <sup>to</sup> present some of the Confucian ideas which have badly influenced and degraded the status of Korean women. In Confucian teaching, the function of women is simple and clear - to "obey" "men". Before marriage, she has to obey her father, after marriage, to obey her husband, and at the event of the husband's death, to obey to her son. In the marriage system, the traditional Confucian view meant, women did not have the right to choose their marriage partners, nor to allow to divorce, nor to remarry. Because the son is very important to carry on a family line, if she could not give birth to a son, she would not be accepted as a member of family-in-law. The Confucian idea is still deeply grounded into the Korean culture and society and influences on the value and morals of

the Korean people. Even in these days, for example, with the influence of Confucianism, widows are expected not to remarry, a divorced woman (although initiated by her husband) would have a bad reputation, and an unmarried woman is considered not a perfect person or one who has a flaw.

It was not only Confucian teaching that oppressed the Korean women, but Korean suffering history drove the Korean women into the worse situation. During the Japanese occupation of Korea, from 1910 to 1945, Korean women had to suffer doubly in serving the Korean men generally as well as the Japanese oppressors. Approximately 200,000 young women forced to be taken into "Chungsin-tae", the "comfort women troop", by the Japanese to serve their soldiers.

During World War II and the Japanese colonial rule, debasement of Korean women reached its peak when the Japanese took in "comfort women" for their Imperial Army. It was estimated that approximately 200,000 young Korean women, drafted in the name of army personnel or voluntary nurse, were sent to the front lines as army prostitutes. Those young girls, 17-20 years of age, were sexually abused by the Japanese soldiers. It was not unusual to see a line of as many as 50-60 men a day waiting for one woman's service. After the surrender of Japan, the fate of those women is a heartrending story. For example, some of them were massacred by handgrenades thrown by soldiers in flight, wandered in the jungle and finally died of hunger and exhaustion. There were some lucky survivors who were able to reach Korea, but, having the stigma of a prostitute, they could not go home steeped in the tradition of the Confucian ethic. (Quoted from Rhim, Sonn Man, "The Status of Women in Traditional Korean Society". in Korean

Women in A Struggle for humanization. The Korean  
Christian Scholars Publication No. 3 (Spring 1978)  
p. 29)

Recently, this "Comfort Women Troop" has become an issue in Korea, and some of the survival victims have been taken to the public as witnesses. But most of them have lived in isolated places from where their families live and changed their name. They do not want to bring their family into public. At the same way, their family considers them as better being dead.

The influence of Confucian idea on the Korean women's status has been found even in Korean immigrant household in the United States. In my opinion, in a sense, Korean women living in the U.S. have a more difficult role than if in Korea. In this country they face the double demands of American society and the demands of Korean tradition which has been formed by Confucian teaching.

However, we can also find that Korean women have fostered themselves and kept their dignity with sense of celebration and connection in spite of their oppressed situation. Traditionally, Koreans were a people who knew how to celebrate their lives in whatever situation they were. They used have special festivities once a month. Even in tragic situation they practiced cultural rituals and festivities. Despite of a lot of the limitation of outside activity, the Korean women were not excluded from those rituals and festivities. They were released from the bounds

of household, they participated in and enjoyed those rituals and festivities. Korean women celebrated their humanness and womanness and had connection to their mothers and daughters through the experience of practicing cultural rituals and festivities along with recreations, dances, songs, humors, story telling, etc. Specific explanations about this subject will be discussed on my project paper.

What I have discussed here will be a basic knowledge to understand my dance. In my dance, I portrays myself a woman who can be easily found anywhere in Korea.

#### A Scene of a Dance

She has felt safe and naive within the boundary of her household, been blinded for her cultural consciousness by the westernized education and not been identified with who she is or what she is

"until she is unmarried,  
until she become a single mother,  
until she cannot bear a son,  
until she become a secondary wife,  
until she is divorced,  
until she become a widow,  
until she is taken to "chungsin-tae" - "comfort women troop"  
for Japanese soldiers,  
until she has the stigma of prostitute,  
until she want to have a dignity as a woman, and

until she want to know who she really is."

It seems that there is no place for her in this world. Even a room in a funeral bier because, traditionally, a woman like her who did not live a "normal life" was not supposed to be served with a formal funeral rite. With a dirge, she seems completely dead.

*Yeu~ yeu~~~ yeu hwa numcha  
Eui gari num~cha nu-hwa-num*

A woman brings nothing when she is born,  
and takes nothing when she dies.  
Life in this world is like a floating cloud in the sky.

*Yeu~ yeu~~~ yeu~ numcha  
Eui gari num~cha nu-hwa-num.*

But her consciousness struggling against the injustice and dehumanization brings her life back to rebirth. And she never stops struggling to have her life given back to her, knowing that she is already in a full of celebration of her humanness and womanness. "Let us begin!"

- A Dirge of a Funeral Bier of Korea - (1)

(chorus)

*Yeu~ yeu~~~ yeu~ hwa numcha*  
*Eui gari num~cha nu-hwa-num* (Oh! How can I get over  
this long way.)

(This song does not have a specific meaning, but describes the dead person's feeling of affection for and abandonment of this world and of nihilistic expectation for the other world.)

(chorus)

People said that *Buk-mang* Mt.(2) is far from us.  
But *Buk-mang* Mt. is not far from me.  
It is just across the mountain.

(chorus)

People said that *Hwang-chon* River(3) is far from us.  
But *Hwang-chon* River is not far from me.  
It is just across the river.

(chorus)

A person brings nothing when s/he is born,  
and takes nothing when s/he dies.  
life in this world is like a floating cloud in the sky.

(chorus)

- (1) This song is one of the Korean dirge songs sung in the south part of Korea.
- (2) Traditionally, Korean people have thought of *Buk-mang* mountain as the place to where a dead person would go.
- (3) a river in the world of the dead