

Review Essay

The New Woman Arrives Again: A Review of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea's Exhibition on *Sin yŏsŏng*

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Abstract

This review essay examines the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea's (MMCA) 2017–2018 exhibition on the "New Woman" (*Sin yŏsŏng*) and its contradictory celebration and critique of the multifaceted modern woman whose consumerist as well as anti-patriarchal qualities allow for mixed and often contradictory interpretations and political trajectories. Through close readings of paintings, video installations, and other works on display pertaining to the topics of objectification, commodity fetishism, and the division of labor, this essay parses the various representations of Korea's new woman as well as her legacy in the present. The reviewer suggests that the tension between the different facets of the modern woman speaks to a wider ambivalence in the collective historical memory of the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945) in contemporary South Korea, which simultaneously embraces two contradictory positions: repudiation of the Japanese colonial project on the one hand and recuperation of the capitalist development initiated by colonization on the other.

Keywords: New Woman, *Sin yŏsŏng*, feminism, colonial Korea, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art–Korea, culture industry

Ten Points for the Modern Woman

1. Don't listen to elders.
2. Don't devote your life to raising a daughter.
3. Wherever you go, be a woman.
4. Don't follow the latest overseas trends.
5. Don't let your life revolve around love.
6. Learn to play some games.
7. Stay ahead of the times.
8. Stay healthy.
9. Make a new youth for yourself.
10. Learn to read and write Hangŭl.

- Yun Chi-hun, *Sin yŏsŏng* (1931)¹

¹ Yun Chi-hun, *Sin yŏsŏng* (New woman), vol. 4: 70–73 (Seoul: Kaebyŏksa, 1931), reprinted in the exhibition catalogue (MMCA 2017a, 42); the translation is mine.

The “New Woman” returned to South Korea with the exhibition at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (hereafter MMCA), *The Arrival of New Women*, which ran from December 21, 2017, through April 1, 2018, at the MMCA’s Deoksugung branch (figure 1).² “New Woman” (*Sin yŏsŏng*) is a term used for the emergence, primarily in the 1920s and 1930s, of new gender roles for Korean women as consumers, workers, or agents of their own emancipation in the public sphere, and often all three combined. Although this subject has been closely scrutinized in recent scholarly publications and exhibitions, the MMCA made an original contribution by bringing together creative works and historical documents ranging from photography, painting, sculpture, and embroidery to popular music, film, literature, and material artifacts like high heels, umbrellas, makeup cases, LPs, and an almost comically large 1910 Columbia Records wooden phonograph.³ As a result, the exhibition provided a rich palimpsest of cultural history from the 1930s in particular, but extending into the 1960s, and also featured several thoughtful contemporary works by women artists engaging with the legacy of the new woman through not only liberal but also radical and socialist feminist perspectives.

The visitor to the exhibition would have quickly detected the tension, explicitly acknowledged by the curators, between countervailing celebratory and critical approaches in its treatment of the new woman as a free spirit nevertheless caught in the vise grip of a patriarchal, colonial capitalism, a tension that gets to the heart of the ambivalence in South Korean collective memory and recollections of the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945). This ambivalence has largely to do with the contradictory demands of a hegemonic nationalism at present. On the one hand, this nationalist narrative must posit the colonial period as a dark blotch on Korean history—an era of despair, of suppression and assassinations of independence activists, of the usurpation of Korea’s sovereignty and rightful place in the purportedly natural, world-historical transition into nation-states witnessed in both the West and imperial Japan.

² The exhibition’s webpage is available at <http://www.mmca.go.kr/eng/exhibitions/exhibitionsDetail.do?menuId=1010000000&exhId=201703080000529>.

³ The following is a selection of representative works on modern women in both Japan and Korea. For an invaluable collection of primary documents from the colonial period, see Choi (2013). On art historical representations, including analysis of a number of paintings featured in the MMCA exhibition, see Youngna Kim’s essay, “Modernity in Debate: Representing the ‘New Woman’ and ‘Modern Girl,’” (Kim 2005, 64–87) and Ikeda (2012). On the broader context of capitalist development, urbanization, and the emergence of modern girls in Japan’s consumerist public sphere, see Silverberg (2006). On representations of love and amorous relations in literature, see Kwŏn (2003) and Suzuki (2009). For a class-oriented critique of the modern woman from a socialist feminist perspective, see Sunyoung Park’s reading of the colonial period novelist Kang Kyŏng-ae, “Rethinking Feminism in Colonial Korea: Kang Kyŏng-ae’s Portraits of Proletarian Women” (Park 2015, 197–231). For a more comparative, global overview of the “new woman” phenomenon, see the collection of essays edited by Weinbaum et al. (2012).



Figure 1. Exhibition poster for “The Arrival of New Women.” *Source:* All images in this essay are courtesy of the MMCA.

It follows, this narrative continues, that Korea would have achieved modern statehood as well if Japanese imperialism had not derailed the development of the Empire of Korea (1897–1910). For these reasons, the national ideology of sovereignty must currently appear to reject Japanese colonial rule, maintaining that brave Koreans had always opposed it (indeed, many did), all the while participating, on the surface, in the ongoing search for former collaborators and their descendants. Yet this search and the wider anti-Japanese perspective it exemplifies stand in contradiction to the fact that many of those who were most guilty of collaboration in influential positions in the colonial government went on to rule the post-independence Republic of Korea after 1948, including dictator Park Chung-hee, whose daughter, Park Geun-hye, became South Korea’s first woman president (from 2013 to 2017).

Conversely, this same nationalist discourse must celebrate the colonial period *but without Japan*, insofar as it was essentially Japanese colonization that laid the groundwork for Korea's rapid industrialization and emergence into the capitalist world system—leaving aside here the small group of left-nationalist historians who insist on the presence of an “indigenous capitalism” (*t'och'ak chabon*) preceding colonization. This celebratory posture is evident in the various filmic reinterpretations of colonial Korea during the last decade or so as a site of glamour and exhilarating consumption, as downtown Seoul (then Kyöngsöng, or, in Japanese, Keijō) burst into a sprawling metropolis replete with department stores, banks, railroad stations, streetcars, automobiles, and Japanese-style markets. Although such films are obliged to insert a parallel storyline about anti-Japanese independence activities, it is apparent that the “miracle on the Han River,” the global financial powerhouse that contemporary South Korea has become, must not altogether reject its capitalist origins by treating the formative colonial period too harshly. Instead, this review adheres to an alternative perspective to these two approaches, as presented by historian Carter Eckert ([1991] 2017) and others, one that recognizes the indispensable role of Japanese colonization in the early capitalist development of the Korean peninsula but that nevertheless remains highly critical of Japan's colonial project.

Here is where the new woman exhibition comes in. Gallery 1, located on the second floor of the west wing of the Sökjojön building in Deoksugung Palace, which was annexed to the main Sökjojön Hall in 1938 and served to house the colonial government during the period in question, featured an introductory section titled “New Women on Parade.” As the exhibition's brochure explains, this expression was used to refer to the appearance of new women “out on a stroll,” most closely associated with the so-called “modern girl” (K. *modön köl*, J. *modan gāru*) and the connotations she brings of shopping and extravagance as well as independence and a free spirit derided by social conservatives (2017c, np.). The expression also refers more broadly to certain women's newfound immersion in public venues—from newspaper photographs and advertisements to posters, billboards, films, LPs, and magazine covers, not to mention their new public appearance as café waitresses, hotel receptionists, streetcar girls, and other flexible positions in a newly established service economy. This visibility overlaps with art historian Youngna Kim's treatment of “the image of the New Woman more as an outward appearance than as a person standing for principles” (2005, 68). According to Kim, “the term New Woman included not only those who supported women's rights and equality or those who received a modern education and worked outside the home, but also women whose hair or clothing style distinguished them from traditional women” (68). Thus, the new consumerist female subject out strutting on the streets, drawing both scorn (mostly from older males) and fascination alike, corresponded to the objective growth of capitalism and a consumer-oriented society in colonial Korea more broadly.

The museum's press release outlines the conflicting demands placed on the emergent new woman as follows:

Joseon's women found themselves in a dilemma, facing repression and contradiction—imperialism and colonialism, the persisting patriarchal system, a clash of Western culture and Eastern cultures. As colonial subjects and as women, the new women of Joseon were positioned as doubly “other,” unable to function as major driving forces in modernization. For this reason, the new woman in Joseon Korea also became an icon for the schismatic implications of modernity. (MMCA 2017b, 2)

Japanese theorist and social critic Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke labeled the parallel phenomenon in Japan, as recounted by historian Harry Harootunian, as the “feminization of culture” (Harootunian 2000, 11). Scholar of Japanese literature and culture Miriam Silverberg identifies the ways in which Japan's own “modern girl” (*modan gāru* or abbreviated as *moga*) took shape in a changing social landscape conveyed by the simultaneously pejorative and reappropriated phrase popular at the time, “erotic, grotesque, nonsense” (*ero guro nansensu*), describing the *moga* as “a glittering, decadent, middle-class consumer who, through her clothing, smoking and drinking, flaunts tradition in the urban playgrounds of the late 1920s” (Silverberg 2006, 52). With burgeoning industrialization, the social division of labor deepened into greater and greater specialized domains of work, and gender roles likewise took on a new, historically specific meaning that was isomorphic with this wider division in the workplace. Women thus began to populate the new service sector in unprecedented numbers, filling the gap left by men who took up work in more “masculine,” heavy industries or remained in the countryside as agricultural laborers. Concurrently, the emergence of a temporal bifurcation of the solar day into leisure and work time created a more or less middle class of consumers with time and surplus income to spend on the growing culture industry of entertainment venues, cafés, clubs, and cinemas.

The new woman is thus inextricable from this division of labor, time, gender, and social experience into two poles—production and consumption—with reproduction (women's domestic and care work) mediating and subtending them, and which together encompass the various gender-political limits and possibilities circumscribing her activities. As such, her iconic figure provides a kind of nexus of the competing social forces constituting this “schismatic” modernization, however deeply patriarchal norms continue to suppress this reality even in retrospect. The locus of the new woman thus discloses simultaneously both the objective unfreedom of a newfound condition of wage slavery (under mostly Japanese, but sometimes Korean, capital) and the multiple and competing promises of public life mediated by monetary exchange. Her appearance thereby signals not only deliberate resistance to traditional norms but also an objective compulsion under market conditions to begin populating the workplace and purchasing consumer goods. Frequently she herself also becomes another commodity out in circulation, either as spectacle, in the accumulated sensational image—the very category of “newness”—or as literal object, in the expanding line of sex work and other proximate kinds of care or affective labor (such as *kisaeng* performers, café and bar hostesses, and the like).

Unfortunately the latter were largely excluded, but the exhibition overall carefully and competently distilled these various problematics as reflected in visual, musical, and material culture from the period. Along with attention to the public sphere into which women made their first entrance, visitors were also shown corresponding pressures and dynamics in the domestic sphere, as new women had to navigate between older, traditional patriarchal norms and expectations from more modern, but not necessarily less patriarchal, husbands and peers. On this point, the bilingual brochure lists one of the exhibition's goals as "examining the gulf between the ideal and the reality facing new women in both free love and marriage under a sternly patriarchal system" (MMCA 2017c). Likewise, as the curatorial notes astutely observe, the Other of the new woman is not the "new man" but the "old woman," the two forming a dialectical pair in which one is judged according to her opposite, just as modernity only becomes visible in relief against the past which it itself produces anew, and both members are circumscribed within the symbolic order of capitalist domination.

The exhibition's second section, "I Am Painting, and Painting Becomes I: Women Artists in Modern Times," surveyed the first efforts toward a systematic education system for girls and then focused on works specifically by women artists, including not only modern oil painting—which first came to Korea in the 1910s from Europe and Japan, where many of the featured artists had studied—but also the traditional arts of ink painting and, quite interestingly, embroidery (we are told how this latter, typically "women's" craft has been retroactively excluded from modern art history, see MMCA 2017a, 117). By way of conclusion, the third and final section, "Woman Is Everything: 5 New Women," selected five extraordinary women for more extensive coverage: Korea's first woman Western-style painter and writer, Na Hye-sök; the first modern dancer in Korea, Ch'oe Sŭng-hŭi; novelist Kim Myöng-sun; beloved popular singer Yi Nan-yöng; and socialist feminist activist Chu Se-juk.

Upon first entering the Sökjojön annex, the visitor was immediately confronted by a ceiling-high, semi-transparent glass panel dividing the lobby space on which an enormously magnified photographic image of colonial Seoul circa 1930 was reproduced. The photograph was taken from the roof garden of the Mitsukoshi Department Store (now Shinsegae, and site of the concluding, suicidal lines from Yi Sang's modernist and sexist novella *Wings*, perhaps colonial Korea's most cherished piece of fiction), overlooking the Bank of Korea and a large, vertical billboard inscribed with the katakana letters for *crème du lait*, reminding us that at the time Korea was Japan. The visitor could certainly not overlook the exhibition's genuine appreciation for details—on the second floor, for example, the small windows of the neoclassical building were charmingly overlaid with similar semi-transparent photographic reproductions of colonial-era street scenes and embellished with matching green velvet curtains.

This upstairs lobby also featured three separate listening stations replete with headphones and glass cases framing various musical paraphernalia, including LP covers, sheet music, posters, and liner notes from Korea's early "popular music" (*taejung ŭmak*) scene. As the exhibition made clear, most records produced during the colonial period were owned by Japanese branches of American record companies, notably Columbia and Victor, as was evident in the katakana-heavy LP

covers and promotional posters reproduced for display in the lobby. Here the visitor could listen to an assortment of delightful, original K-pop selections, including the very catchy 1938 single “I’m Seventeen” (“Nanŭn yŏl ilgopsal”) sung by Pak Tan-ma and composed by Yi Pu-p’ung with lyrics by Chŏn Su-rin, formalizing the incongruity between collective, subjective desires to have fun and objective misery under colonialism. A promotional poster beside the phonograph of comical proportions announcing Polydor Records in a prominent katakana transliteration evidences Japanese capital’s control over colonial Korea’s blossoming recording industry. In addition to this music station, notable films from the colonial period with strong roles for new women were screened in separate rooms throughout the three galleries. These include Yang Chu-nam’s *Sweet Dream (Mimong, 1936)*, Lee Pyŏng-il’s *Spring on the Peninsula (Pando ŭi pom, 1941)*, and Korea’s oldest extant film, *Crossroads of Youth (Ch’ŏngch’un ŭi sipjaro, 1934)*.⁴

The first artwork the visitor encountered in Gallery 1 was Kim Chu-kyŏng’s vibrant 1929 *View with Mt. Pukak in the Background (Paekaksan ŭl paekyŏng ŭro han p’ungkyŏng, figure 2)*. Quite large at 97.5 x 130 cm, though not so in comparison with some of the other works featured, the oil painting is an outstanding first selection, setting a high bar for the works to follow. Awash in a cream, forest-green, and azure palette, the city scene features the façade of the colonial governor-general building (now the Seoul Metropolitan Library in front of the new city hall) and looks northward to Seoul’s mountainous surroundings. It is punctuated by a single human form, a new woman facing away from the viewer as she “parades” down the main street with an open red parasol over her shoulder. Despite the fact that Kim delicately balances this bright parasol with some red shading accenting the bushes and tree trunk in the painting’s lower left corner, and that the parasol’s oval shape is itself a kind of bulls-eye among the limestone-tinged surroundings, one could at first be so enthralled by the impressive cityscape overpowering the new woman as to overlook her presence altogether.

Kim describes the mountainous background and tree leaves in the foreground using Cezanne-like, concise strokes with medium-sized brushes, and abbreviates the various building surfaces with more expressive, substantive, and almost abstract gestures. The painting thus stands as a condensation of Korea’s accelerated modernization under Japanese rule, making good on the development of European capitalism and art history in twenty or so years. Balancing two poles of modern painting—the proto-Cubist, postimpressionism of Cezanne’s landscapes and the breakdown of figuration in geometric abstraction—Kim’s *View with Mt. Pukak* speaks to the uneven (even “belated”) development of colonial Korea vis-à-vis metropolitan Japan and Western Europe, which refracts and distorts the chronology of the European arts in an amalgam making Kim’s work not “behind the times” but rather indexical of this historical *mélange*.

⁴ The first two of these films are available with English subtitles on the Korean Film Archive’s Youtube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/user/KoreanFilm>). For *Sweet Dream*, visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmd_OBPF1I8. For *Spring on the Peninsula*, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOMiZnCb7s>.



Figure 2. Kim Chu-kyōng, *View with Mt. Pukak in the Background*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 97.5 x 130 cm.

The structure of feeling in colonial Korea was one in which the earliest inklings of modernity's dissolution of the self—formalized by Cezanne, along with his admirers in Japan, such as Yanase Masamu and Yorozu Tetsugorō—and the radical visualization of the commodity form's objectification by geometric abstraction could occupy the same breath; they were not separated from each other by half a century but forced into close proximity just as Japanese capital forced new class relations onto the Korean peninsula. Here, then, lies one explanation for why the natural landscape and urbanization in Kim's painting can be blended with such compositional integrity. Unlike in Europe, these two were not remote from each other, separated by time; the full arrival of the landscape in linear perspective was coeval with the rise of the twentieth-century industrial city.

The telescoping perspectival effect of bringing Mt. Pukak to press up against the towering city hall thus speaks to this early experience of time-space compression wrought on modernizing colonial Korea through cadastral surveys, redistribution of property, imperium, and market-oriented urban architecture, and other determinants of what historian Todd Henry calls the "collapsing spaces" of Japanese rule, producing "the highly uneven and disjointed state of early Keijō" (2014, 37). Here Kim's use of perspectival depth (or the lack thereof), pressing together natural background and metropolitan foreground, visually renders this schematic and accelerated explosion of urban Kyōngsōng, almost as if to capture the vortex-like manner in which city colonizes country. Hereby the gravity of market forces, evident in the spatial organization of the city in a manner most conducive to commerce, pulls into its orbit surrounding satellites, such that the colonial metropolis becomes the epicenter of colonial development and expands outward, its sprawl shrinking and subsuming surrounding territory.

Kim's painting places the parasol-twirling woman literally at the center of all this flux, her seemingly innocent stroll indicative, like the tip of an iceberg, of a whole range of underlying contradictions, prejudices, and injustices as the new woman takes center stage in the formation of a modern public sphere against the backdrop of a newly rationalized natural environment. Nonetheless, the painting's gentle palette and overall placid, almost idyllic tonality refrains from carrying these critical implications further. This tranquility implies instead something of a peaceful coexistence between city and country that belies the brutal material reality of uneven development. The work succeeds in repurposing an impressionist idiom for describing the city without sacrificing its formal commitments by, for example, adopting a futurist or expressionist aesthetic in the style of Umberto Boccioni or Ernst Ludwig Kirchner better suited to capturing the violent and alienating impulses of urbanization. Kim's effort thus simultaneously masquerades this urban intensity as if it were the timeless tranquility of the pastoral genre.

If modern meant Western, it was only in a highly mediated sense—for example, when Japan's own internalization and revamping of Western trends were imported to colonial Korea and once again made new. This process of adaptation is visible in Kim In-sŭng's masterpiece, *Spring Melody (Pom ūi karak, 1942)*, which was painted in the heat of the Pacific War and marks the influence of Koiso Ryōhei's 1938 *Dancers in Rehearsal (Renshūba no odorikodachi, 190 x 180 cm)*, particularly the arrangement of women and the standing male violinist at rest behind the seated cellist in the foreground. This similarity is unsurprising, considering that most members of the new generation of young Korean artists working in Western-style painting (*sōyanghwa*) had studied abroad at fine arts institutions in Japan, and their art education infrastructure vastly surpassed that of colonial Korea's. These artists were thus readily familiar with extant Japanese works and painterly vernaculars, even to the point of resentment or rivalry. They were necessarily steeped in an academicism sponsored by the colonial authorities and frequently displayed in the Chosŏn Art Exhibition (or *Senten* in its Japanese abbreviation), making early Korean experiments in modernist abstraction and formalism outside this circuit so unique in their aberration and subversion of hegemonic trends.⁵

Kim In-sŭng's *Spring Melody*, an impressive realist composition separately framed in two adjacent canvases whose dimensions reach 147 x 207 cm, alone fills one of the gallery walls. Kim's subjects, a group of young women surrounding a single male cellist—an arrangement quite revealing of the persistence of male dominance—are painted with faces that resemble Westerners more than Koreans, despite the distinctive, colorful women's *chōgori* blouses and *hanbok* skirts.⁶ As the exhibition notes detail, Na Hye-sŏk also fancies herself as a Western woman in her 1928 self-portrait (figure 3), not surprising given that she matured as a painter during a stint of study in Paris in the late 1920s. This imagery is interesting insofar as it indicates a possible (even if unconscious) desire among Korean artists to leap over

⁵ See Youngna Kim's chapter, "Korean Avant-Garde Groups in Tokyo in the 1930s," for a helpful outline of these competing circuits (Kim 2005, 123–151).

⁶ The Western appearance of the painting's subjects is also noted by Youngna Kim (2005, 74).

and negate their immediate colonial overlord so as to establish some coevalness with the West through the basic medium of human figuration.

After all, Japanese and Korean phenotypes were often indistinguishable. Thus, Japanese racialist science at the time had to fabricate disambiguating traits for each in order to ensure Japanese ethnic superiority. The substitution of Western faces for Korean ones thus might evidence not only the presence of colonialist self-hatred, as it were, but an externalization and redirection of this antipathy toward imperial Japan. Some critics may recognize in these choices a slavish dependency on either Western or Japanese imperialism. But as popular-music scholar Chang Yu-jöng (2012) concludes in her discussion of the “transplantedness” (*isiksöng*) of “trot”- style popular songs (*taejung kayo*) from Japan, the various Korean modern arts internalized these foreign influences and then blazed their own trails distinct from the European and Japanese metropolises, a larger process not of mere imitation but of dynamic adaptation and innovation.⁷



Figure 3. Na Hye-sök, *Self-Portrait*, 1928. Oil on canvas, 88 x 75 cm.

⁷ Chang’s essay “Three Sisters, Blazing Flames of Popular Culture: Yun Sim-dök, Ch’oe Söng-hü, Yi Nan-yöng” (“Pulkkot ch’öröm salda kan taejung munhwakye üi sae önni: Yun Sim-dök, Ch’oe Söng-hü, Yi Nan-yöng”) appears in the exhibition catalogue (MMCA 2017a).

Yi Yu-t'ae's 1944 complementary paintings, *One Pair (Inmul ildae)*, a highlight of the exhibition, register the multiple social formations that cohere in the concept of the new woman. The pair's right-hand composition, *Rhyme (Hwaun)*, features a woman seated at her desk with a musical score, a baby grand piano prominently displayed behind her, as she admires a vase of beautiful chrysanthemums in front of her (figure 4b). The clarity and precision afforded by color on paper rather than oil in Yi's composition recalls Nakamura Daizaburō's *nihonga*-style 1926 painting *Piano*, with its shared themes of domestic space, traditional dress, and a female pianist. Apparently contemplating the score from which she is taking a rest, the woman represents the domain of aesthetics, in contrast to the woman scientist in Yi's companion piece (figure 4a), *Research (T'amgu)*. Whether she is in fact the same woman or her doppelganger is not entirely clear; the latter bears a certain resemblance to Japanese *nihonga* painter Ōta Chō's *Women Observing the Stars (Hoshi o miru josei, 1936)*, particularly concerning their parallel opposition between traditional femininity and modern science signaled through optical magnification by means of a telescope (Ōta) or microscope (Yi).⁸ This correspondence between Japanese and Korean paintings again demonstrates both the proximity (and inequality) between the colonial and metropolitan artistic scenes, as well as the necessarily colonial nature and origin of scientific development and circumscription of gender roles in modern Korea.

In Yi Yu-t'ae's painting, the scientist wears a pristine white lab coat over her *chōgori* and *hanbok* skirt while seated at a laboratory table on which a microscope, a pair of large batteries, a circuit conductor, and other scientific instruments are assembled. The pair of women together represents the division, in the Kantian sense connoting specialization, of the faculties into separate areas—science on the one hand, and art and aesthetics on the other— what Youngna Kim calls the two paintings' "contrast" between "science and art, and reason and sensibility" (2005, 76). That these two areas were split apart from a once-totalizing *Wissenschaft* or science of knowledge combining art, chemistry, physics, anatomy, politics, religion, history, and economics together is, as Marxist theorist Georg Lukács elucidates, part of the same reification that divides the labor process into male and female, skilled and unskilled, mental and manual workers (1972, 86).

In her nuanced and illuminating reading of Yi Yu-tae's complicated relationship to *nihonga* painting and Japanese imperial propaganda, art historian Joan Kee observes that "the juxtaposition of *Research* alongside *Hwaun* emphasizes the precariousness of women's lives, regardless of their affluence or education. She could be a scientist one day and a lady of leisure the next, but this multiplicity was not only a function of choice, but also of obligation." Kee thus inquires, "Did a woman have to *visibly* fulfill multiple roles in order to be legitimated as proper or worthy?" (Kee 2018).

⁸ For an acute reading of Ōta's painting in particular and the representation of modern girls in Japanese paintings more broadly, see Ikeda (2012).



Figure 4a (left). Yi Yu-t'ae, *One Pair: Research*, 1944. Color on paper, 212 x 153 cm.
Figure 4b (right). Yi Yu-t'ae, *One Pair: Rhyme*, 1944. Color on paper, 212 x 153 cm.

One curious aspect of the laboratory setting, however, is the pair of white rabbits in separate wire cages in the painting's lower right. The depiction of the rabbits' eyes with a pinkish-red tint on the painting's paper surface diverges from the cute, wide-eyed anime bunnies to which we are now accustomed, placing the rabbits beyond the radius of our empathy. But it is rather the set of wires, originally connected to the corroding, acidic battery terminals behind them that are most disconcerting. Although the wires drop down from the desk and below the cages, out of our line of sight, we begin to wonder if the rabbits are being intermittently shocked, or even electrocuted. The cages tell us that they are certainly subjects of at least some kind of laboratory experiment.

On this point, Joan Kee proposes that "the beady red eyes of the rabbits otherwise destined for an untimely fate at the woman's hand are also the eyes that function like surveillance monitors in embryo. She is being watched and by extension, she is being fixed in her place." Accordingly, Kee presciently observes, "much like the rabbit cages, the coat also contains a body. Her controlled facial expression and the sheathing of her body in the white laboratory coat loops back to the overarching conscription of the body into the imperial war machine" (Kee 2018).

Although it would be improper to retroactively judge the painter or this strong, independent and intellectually capable young woman scientist against a contemporary standard of progressive ecological or post-human thinking that was simply not available to them at the time, I nevertheless wish to emphasize the ways in which, in tandem with its culpability in the kinds of "dark" medicine outlined by Kee, modern science of the sort that radically separates subject from object went

hand in hand with both the division of the sexes and human domination over non-human nature congealed in the painting. The woman's downward gaze through the microscope from the upper region of the canvas signals her authority and calculated distance from the object of study, typifying male-dominated scientific rationality rather than resisting it, and thus problematizing the partial feminist victory signaled by the woman's entrance into the laboratory workforce, which also bears important ramifications for the social status of women's waged work at present under hierarchical and patriarchal capitalist norms.

Elsewhere in the exhibition's first gallery, in dialogue with playful or dazzling celebrities, such as photographs of the beauty (*miin*) Mun Chi-ch'ang and smiling actress Kim Sin-jae, a series of paintings across the room explored the deeper emotional spectrum and gendered location of the new woman, highlighting the rift between domestic and public obligations. Im Kun-hong's *Seated Woman* (*Yŏin chwasang*, 1936), despite her new shoes clashing somewhat with her traditional dress, is clearly preoccupied with something more profound; this middle-aged woman's absent gaze toward an unknown point outside the compositional frame, together with the painting's economical, bleak surroundings—dark floorboards and a plainly painted wall—invoke the hostile outside world of male, colonial society into which she must nevertheless escape from her domestic prison. The brilliantly clad younger woman in Son Eung-sŏng's *Clothes for a Stroll* (*Sanbobok*, 1940; figure 5) gazes back at her, their lines of sight intersecting, as if to say, "It's not much better over here." Her fashionable pink dress and stylish, ribboned hat—monuments to the consumer cult of the new woman—are clearly at odds with her anxious expression and twiddling fingers. Younger women may be more stylish, more beautiful, the painting tells us, but they face objectification all the more for it.



Figure 5. Son Eung-sŏng, *Clothes for a Stroll*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 90.8 x 64.7 cm.

Contemporary communization theorist Maya Gonzalez (2011) makes the compelling argument that the gendered division of labor under capitalism originates with women's biological capacity for producing offspring, which capital sees as an added price tag, a liability resulting from biologically necessitated maternity leave and its additional costs relative to male workers. Thus, according to Gonzalez, although feminist theory has already demonstrated how the sex/gender system is not ultimately anchored in biological sex, *even the latter is socially constructed* through capital's demand for a gendered division of the labor force. Na Hye-sök resists this socialization in her 1921 poem "Nora," a response to Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*, boldly stating, "I am a human being/before I am my husband's wife/before I am my children's mother" (MMCA 2017a, 75). As if anticipating Gonzalez's thesis, Na reverses capital's imperative insisting that, because of her sex, she is a (potential) mother first, only secondarily a human being, and this irrespective of whether or not she herself ever has children.

A small corner in Gallery 2 reserved for women workers and their resistance featured Na's poem as well as a few other materials, including, for example, An Sök-ju's drawing and cover design for the cover of the inaugural issue of *Friends of the Rose of Sharon (Kǔnu)*, a journal dedicated to women's rights and liberation. Literature scholar Sunyoung Park describes this image accordingly:

The first issue of *Kǔnu* ... displayed Ahn Sokchu's abstract, dynamic image of a militant woman. Her hair flying in the wind, she wears a boldly styled skirt and carries a sword. Her right hand grasps what could be a flag, a weapon, or something else—an ambiguity that adds to the subtle power of the image. (2015, caption to plate 8)

The exhibition displayed the *Friends of the Rose of Sharon's* initial demands, which included the abolition of all legally sanctioned social "discrimination" (*ch'abyöl*) against women, as well as the overthrow of all feudal customs and "superstitions" (*misin*). The visitor was also presented with Depression-era, proletarian arts-inspired magazine covers for the June and July 1932 issues of *The Nyuin* (lit., "Woman"), as well as a series of photographs documenting the first efforts at systematizing women's schooling, many of which are now preserved at Ewha Womans University in Seoul. We could have hoped for a more substantial treatment of the so-called "factory girl" (*yǒgong*), but her absence from the exhibition is itself indicative of the aforementioned antagonistic terrain of historical memory and representation of the colonial period in contemporary South Korea. That is, the dearth of radical, anticolonial voices again speaks to an ambivalence vis-à-vis Japanese imperialism; the exhibition focused more on celebrating women's own voices, irrespective of their attitudes toward colonization and gender oppression, than it did on articulating a definitive political stance or intervention. The missing critical implications are therefore left to the visitor to glean from the often quite evocative artworks themselves. Overall, then, a largely middle-class bias pervaded the exhibition, in disappointing contrast to, say, its precursor, the 1998 Art Gallery of New South Wales exhibition *Modern Boy, Modern Girl: Modernity in*

Japanese Art, 1910–1935, which included an impressive selection of proletarian posters and prints alongside exploration of urban youth consumer culture.⁹

Yi Chae-ch'ang's *Woman Reading* (*Toksŏhanŭn yŏin*, 1937) features a woman in comfortable indoor clothing—shoulder-strapped underwear in the absence of a blouse—poring over a book with her neck bent. What might she be reading? In contrast to merely posing as a model, a subject-cum-object of the painter's gaze—one may think of O Chi-ho's *Portrait of A Wife* (*Ch'ŏ ŭi sang*, 1936) as the exhibition's counterpoint in this regard, her prim *hanbok* dress, upright posture and folded hands evocative of male demands for loyalty and propriety—the woman in Yi's portrait deflects the male gaze with her face turned downward into the book, converting and amplifying these social energies into intellectual empowerment through the act of reading. A similar defiance is visible in one of the most exceptional portraits featured in the exhibition, sadly not reprinted in the exhibition catalogue, Yi Chŏng-su's self-portrait (ca. 1940; figure 6). Atypical of the genre, Yi Chŏng-su boldly turns her face away to the right from the viewer's frontal perspective to become visible only in profile, and her eyes are cast on some unseen object even further rightward. Her composed but confident expression conveys little patience with male expectations for women's pornographic exposure. Indeed, the exhibition as a whole was refreshingly free of nudes—the nonnormative, curvaceous body in woman painter Na Sang-yun's *Nude* (*Nudŭ*, 1927) and Pak Rae-hyŏn's dark-skinned, abstracted *Naked Woman* (*Nanyŏ*, 1960) being welcome exceptions.



Figure 6. Yi Chŏng-su, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1940. Oil on canvas, 31.6 x 22 cm.

⁹ See the *Modern Boy, Modern Girl* exhibition catalogue (Ajioka and Menzies 1998).

Similarly, Yi Chŏng-su presents a dialectical counterpoint to Picasso's 1907 *Les Femmes d'Alger*, which shattered the voyeuristic spectatorship of modern art by directly returning the viewer's penetrating gaze. Through the opposite gesture of looking away, Yi similarly frustrates the (male) viewer's expected intimacy presupposed by direct exchange (purchase of services) or indirectly (through class status, rank, and so forth). Yi dons a modern suit—a maroon coat or V-neck sweater with a jet-black tie, whose knot against a white blouse forms a solid anchor to the composition, balancing her short, permed black hair in the bob-style cut characteristic of the new woman. Her modern fashion signals at the same time her newness but also subtle resistance to commodification. And the subdued colors, together with the subject's own mental projection elsewhere, prevents the painting from becoming a spectacle of some immediately tangible female body or a poster for fetish objects flaunting her social class. Yi's modernity is guarded as something belonging simultaneously to the public world that creates newness and to her private inner strength and agency.



Figure 7. Yi Kap-hyang, *Woman Wearing a Cross-Striped Dress*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 112 x 89 cm.

By contrast, Yi Kap-hyang's *Woman Wearing a Cross-Striped Dress* (*KyökJa munŭi osŭl ibŭn yŏin*, 1937; figure 7) represents the very opposite. Brilliantly colored, the large canvas (112 x 89 cm) features a woman seated on a folding chair against a richly toned, uniformly sky-blue background that isolates the posing subject, sharply contrasting with her peach dress interlaced by a red and black striped pattern. At the time when advanced art was rejecting the compositional division between ground and figure, Yi Kap-hyang's painting instead comes to serve as something of an advertisement for the dress. Like Freud's definition of the fetish as the substitution by the part for the whole, the title accentuates the painting's metonymic relationship posited between the dress and the seated woman, her physical body almost an afterthought to the stylish attire. While the dress's tessellating plaid pattern reticulates her corporeal form in a manner akin to the Japanese colonial project's cartographic rationalization of the peninsula through cadastral surveys and landed property registries, fashion commodities further split her subjectivity into an object-like, mannequin-esque model as the olive-hued, round-brim hat occludes her right eye, a feature that could, conversely, signal the simultaneous preservation of her interiority by not fully revealing her sensual(ized) body. Nonetheless, one lesson given by Yi Kap-hyang's painting is that modernity at once erects and tears down the separation between high and low art; the public sphere of commodity relations forged in an incipient culture industry cannot leave highbrow painting where it stands (abstraction is a negative, inward response to this reification qua popularization). Although it is an accomplished composition, *Woman Wearing a Cross-Striped Dress* also shares with the more crudely sketched magazine covers and posters on display an advertiser's sensibility for woman's salability.

An intelligent contemporary intervention concerning the legacy of the new woman is provided in Gallery 2 by Kim To-hŭi and Cho Yŏng-ju's video installation piece, *Reader for the New Woman* (*Sin yŏsŏng tokbon*), a triptych of three large video screens each running a separate, parallel message: the first screen, on the left, features a close-up, frontal shot of a young woman with cheek-length short hair and a bare neck and shoulders, but her anonymous face is cut off from the eyes up. She moves her lips to utter key words from an archive of contentious writings about the phenomenon of the new woman during the colonial period underlined in the literary passages presented on the second, middle screen. These include terms like "harlot" (*t'angnyŏ*) or "spent girl" (*hŏn kyejip*) that appeared in male literature—namely, Pak T'ae-wŏn's novella *A Day in the Life of Kubo the Novelist* (*Sosŏlga Kubo ssi ŭi iril*, 1934) and Yŏm Sang-sŏp's novel *Sunflower* (*Haebalagi*, 1924), respectively. The third screen, on the right (figure 8), is a close-up shot from the knees downward of young women's legs swaying in a slow, rhythmic motion while each camera take switches to a different outfit (jeans, modern dresses, sweats, *hanbok* skirts, stockings) and footwear (flip-flops, hiking boots, high heels, tennis shoes, cowboy boots, Mary Janes).



Figure 8. Kim To-hŭi and Cho Yŏng-ju, *Reader for the New Woman*, 2017. Video installation, rightmost of three screens.

One may understand this tripartite juxtaposition as a response to much of what was discussed earlier regarding Yi Kap-hyang's *Woman Wearing a Cross-Striped Dress*: the woman's corporeal unity is fragmented and replaced by the fetish-object of sexy legs as it is in present-day advertisements for heels, stockings, or nail polish. But the countervailing terms from the left screen defamiliarize the advertisement-like valences of images on the right in something like a highbrow version of American feminist artist Barbara Kruger's social commentary.¹⁰ The videotaped lips in the leftmost screen appear not as fetish objects (Freud once remarked how strange it was that kissing developed into a near-universal expression of affection) but as the site for women's agency as expressive, communicative subjects. The piece can thereby be said to inject a feminist consciousness by collating the raw material of the textual archive into an intelligible, sexist pattern (the titular "reader" or *tokbon*) and then enunciating its key suppositions as an act of resistance.

Here the exhibition's inclusion of embroidery reminds us that traditional does not always mean reactionary. Particularly memorable in this respect is a small, 1945 embroidered map of the Korean peninsula formed through patterns of rose-of-Sharon flowers and stems, with a caption reading, in a now-outdated Hangŭl spelling, "In Commemoration of Chosŏn's Liberation" (*Chosŏn haebang kŭinyŏm*). A metonym for the exhibition's overall transgression of the autonomous institution of art for a wider cultural history, the practice of embroidery, though largely derogated as mere women's work and vulgar craft, speaks to the utopian promise congealed in all art—a desire for the transformation of the social into a happier, healthier world. That is, embroidery as the decoration of everyday, utilitarian items shares with a range of historical avant-gardes, including the nineteenth-century British Arts and Crafts movement and Soviet Constructivism, an understanding that to remain

¹⁰ Refer to the Guggenheim Museum's entry for Barbara Kruger at <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/barbara-kruger>.

relevant art must make itself available to the public through immersion into life. Despite the more “modern” visual arts that left embroidery and these other public crafts behind, as historian Eric Hobsbawm (1998, 38) contends, it was H. C. Beck’s 1939 London subway map that remains the most impactful and memorable work of avant-garde art in the twentieth century.

A variety of materials pertaining to each of the five highlighted women artists, writers, and activists were displayed in the corners of the exhibition’s Galleries 3 and 4. Running on a large screen above some of Na Hye-sök’s collected writings and photographs, the 2004 documentary film *In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun* (*Wöllae yösöng ün t’aeyang iyötta*) included interviews with a number of prominent feminist women scholars in South Korea, including Yi Sang-Kyöng, Kwön Podürae, and Kim Su-jin (the last of whom contributed an essay to the exhibition catalogue titled “The New Woman: A Kaleidoscope of Colonial Modernity” (*Sikminji kündae üi manhwayöng, sin yösöng*). Ch’oi Süng-hüi’s corner featured paintings and photo prints of her influential modern and Buddhist dances, spotlighting her foundational role in introducing modern dance practice to Korea. Kim Sae-jin’s large video installation work on a ceiling-high projection wall offered an experimental video adaptation of Kim Myöng-sun’s 1951 story “A Chronicle of Bad Blood” (“Nabbün p’i ae kwanhan yöndaegi”).

The glass-enclosed section devoted to singer Yi Nan-yöng displayed various vintage musical instruments and costumes, such as a sparkling two-piece dress, an accordion, and a banjo used by Yi in her successful trio with her daughter and niece, The Kim Sisters, who achieved fame in the United States during the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s. Additionally, Kwön Hye-wön’s 2017 experimental music video *Unknown Song* (*Morünün norae*), an adaptation of Yi’s 1939 blues song “Blue Dream of the Teahouse” (*Tabang ui p’urün kkum*), featured the artist suspended in midair while lip-syncing the song’s lyrics. As the music video progresses, different takes show the artist clothed in Yi’s various costumes—the glittery dress on display, an elegant baby-blue and purple *hanbok* set, and a slim, suggestive black modern one-piece, as the camera makes a 360-degree rotation around her body. At times, the music fades out to leave only a distorted vocal track whose lyrics are rendered unintelligible, and this feature is paralleled by the artist’s occasionally disappearing dangling legs and feet, as if to communicate the inaccessibility of the past mediated through recording technologies or perhaps to deconstruct the (literally) ungrounded diva-persona.

The exhibition concluded with socialist feminist Chu Sae-juk (1901-1953) and a moving contemporary video installation by Kim So-yöng, who also contributed an essay to the catalogue, providing a window onto possible liberatory paths for women. Kim’s installation, *SF DROME: Chu Sae-juk*, is named after the Cosmodrome, the space-exploration rocket launch site in Kazakhstan, to establish an analogy to science fiction’s and socialist feminism’s respective utopian visions of the future. The installation’s videos on two separate screens show footage apparently taken by a drone over the Cosmodrome and various areas of the Kazakhstan countryside, to which Stalin had Chu banished after his 1938 purge of her second husband, Kim Tan-ya, a Korean communist hiding from the Japanese police with Chu in the Soviet Union. Playing on the acronym for both science fiction and socialist feminism, Kim’s

work superimposes on these landscapes footage of a wooden doll flying through the air to allegorize women's freedom and socialist feminism's vision for the future. Kim also includes the text of Chu's final 1946 postliberation petition to Stalin from exile requesting permission to either continue her activities in liberated Korea or return to Moscow to raise her daughter. Because neither of these requests were granted, Kim's piece leaves Chu's particular petition, and her liberatory cause more generally, as open-ended questions remaining to be solved after the collapse of both Soviet-style socialism and capitalism in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. If, as Chu understood, the new woman emerged from within the confines of the commodity form in the metropolises of Western Europe, America, and the Japanese Empire, its relative freedom wedded to the unfreedom of class society, then women's liberation could only be realized with the genuine negation of this form, not simply with ameliorative correctives on capitalist distribution undertaken in the former Soviet Union. Perhaps, with this timely ending, the exhibition wants to say, the truly new woman has yet to arrive.

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