

29. SOUTH KOREAN WOMEN AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, WITH A FOCUS ON THE MODERNITY—TRADITION PARADOX

GRADE LEVEL: 9-12

AUTHOR: Jana S. Eaton

SUBJECT: World History, East Asian History, World Cultures, Women's Studies, Global Education

TIME REQUIRED: 2-3 class periods

OBJECTIVES:

1. Present students with new questions and viewpoints on the role of women relative to the educational achievements of a country.
2. Introduce students to the various roles of Korean women and the role conflicts these women confront today.
3. Provoke thought and discussion on the comparative roles expected of and assumed by women in both Korea and the United States.

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

- Handout 1: Interview of Ji-eun Lee by Jana S. Eaton, July 5, 2000
- Handout 2: South Korea: Placing Education on Top of the Family Agenda
- Handout 3: Women at the Crossroads (five exercises with handouts and four special readings), Korea: Lessons for High School Social Studies Courses. New York: Korea Society, 1999, pp. 129–55, 159–65.
To obtain this document visit: http://www.koreasociety.org/KS_curriculum/HS/2/2-text/2_118.htm

BACKGROUND:

Although there has been a great deal of research about the relative rights of women throughout the world and their opportunities in the workforce, the role of women educators for their offspring is often overlooked. Especially in societies such as Korea in which the fathers have, traditionally, had little to do with child rearing. Likewise, the tensions for Korean women who choose to combine careers with child rearing are considerable. These women confront the paradox of tradition and the twenty-first century aspirations and expectations for liberated women. Even for feminists in the United States, the impact of two-career and one-parenting working families on the intellectual, social, and emotional development of children has become a concern. It is becoming obvious that quality day care, even when available, is seldom the equivalent of a caring and nurturing parent whose relationship to his or her own child is unique; this fact is true in both Korea and the United States.

What is the impact of the Korean mother on the academic achievement of her children and, in the long run, on Korea's economic success? Even if American women stayed at home with their young offspring, would they make comparable contributions as "education moms" to their offspring? As more Korean women move into the career track workforce, what will be the impact on their children?

There have been no national surveys or other pieces of definitive research establishing a causal relationship between the role of the mother as an educator and the high levels of academic achievement in Korea, but there is certainly ample evidence establishing that Korean mothers do assume a more active role in education than their counterparts in the United States. It is also a fact that Korean children score higher in areas that have

been measured against international standards, the latest being comparative studies in science and math. There is also a dearth of research of the impact on Korean education as more Korean women enter and stay in the workforce. How are the children of this pioneer group being cared for? And how are these children faring in comparison with those of nonworking mothers? Are either the private sectors or the Korean government anticipating and planning for alternatives as two-career families inevitably result in a diminished role of Korean women as education moms? Are male parents doing more parenting and educating of their children at the turn of the century, or is an increasing parenting responsibility dependent on whether their wives are working?

PROCEDURE:

1. Open this lesson with a brief class discussion of how American women juggle working and raising a family. Ask the class how their parents divide child-rearing responsibilities and what roles each parent assumes in educating their children. Point out that many children in the United States are reared by single parents who are usually working. Have the class identify special problems for single parents. Next, consider whether day care in the United States is generally adequate and whether it is a suitable replacement for working parents. Generally, is day care as good as parental care? Why or why not? Should children ever be left home alone? If so, when and at what ages? Is it important that children are supervised when it is homework time? To what extent should parents help with education?
2. Explain that Korean women have traditionally assumed considerably more responsibility for the education of their children than have most American women. Now, many are combining careers with motherhood. This is presenting special problems, especially for women married to men who wish to retain traditional gender roles in the home.
3. Assign students to read Handout 1, Interview of Ji-eun Lee, and Handout 2, South Korea: Placing Education on Top of the Family Agenda, silently at their seats. Ask them to make a chart in their notebooks in which they will compile a list of traditional gender roles and roles assumed by younger generation working mothers.
4. Divide the class into cooperative learning groups of approximately five students each. Distribute Handout 3, Women at the Crossroads, to each group. Direct students to divide the era-related exercises and handouts, and the special readings. Students particularly should note traditional and modern prescribed and practiced gender roles, the relationship of traditional roles to Confucianism, and the advances toward equality as well as attendant problems experienced by women in Korea today. They should pay careful attention to the role of women in educating their children.
5. Direct each group to select a recorder/reporter and then discuss the following questions:
 - a. What are the traditional gender roles played by women and how have they been influenced by Confucianism?
 - b. Are women experiencing equal opportunities in both education and the work place today? Why or why not?
 - c. Why are Korean mothers often considered to be "education moms"? In your opinion, to what degree have their educational influences affected Korean economic growth since the 1950s?
 - d. Will the movement of mothers into careers negatively impact educational achievement in Korea? If so, could this eventually impact economic development?
 - e. How do gender roles in Korea compare with gender roles in the United States? What can we learn from the Koreans and what can they learn from us?
6. Have the reporters form a panel to report their respective group's conclusion and findings to the entire class.

EVALUATION:

Possible assessments include:

1. Notebook checks for notes taken on articles and comparative charts
2. Group grade for the content of the findings and conclusions presented by the recorder/reporter

3. Essay questions on an exam
4. Objective test questions
5. Development and presentation of skits based on the assignment
6. PowerPoint group presentations by each group in lieu of reports in a panel discussion format.

Handout 1

INTERVIEW OF JI-EUN LEE

by Jana S. Eaton July 5, 2000

Ji-eun Lee, a thirty-one-year-old Korean woman, is a program officer at the Korea Foundation. She holds a BA from Yonsei University in Seoul and a MA from Hanguk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul. She spent one year at Wittenberg University in Ohio as an undergraduate student. Ji-eun is married to Kwang-Woo, an architect, and they have one four-year old child, a girl named Gia.

How are you managing to combine career and motherhood, and how is your situation similar to or different from that of your mother?

My Mom was a working mother as well, so she had help in the house. Two ladies came to the house for chores, and she hired after-school tutors. It was much cheaper then. Now, labor is very expensive, so it is impossible to do the same as my Mom did. I've solved the problem by a day care center. I also have one tutor to teach the Korean alphabet and another for English instruction. Each tutor comes one day per week and spends about twenty minutes at each session. I then go over the lessons. I am very lucky to have my Mom so close by. Teachers in Korea make sure mothers are involved so they can continue the progress. Next year, my daughter will go one-half day to school. Most young mothers send their kids to some after-school program also. Next year, I am thinking about piano and English lessons after school.

Is quality day care a problem in Korea? Are there baby sitters available for parents who cannot be home in the evenings or do not have access to day care?

I am very lucky to have Mom as a supporter. Many women do not live close to their mothers today. My mother tells me that I must take care of my grandchildren as she is doing for me. Many Korean mothers think that this is the responsibility of a grandmother if she is healthy and lives nearby. Two of my friends

have housekeepers so they can work; the housekeepers take the children to special programs. The trend is for most younger Koreans to work today. Young children often go to a type of gym class for toddlers. Housekeepers take them when mothers work, if the family can afford a housekeeper. They are very expensive today. Sometimes 60 percent of the salary is spent on housekeepers.

Teenage baby-sitting is uncommon. Teens are too busy studying!

Some day care centers are run by the borough (*ku*) office and are subsidized. There are also many private day care centers, but they cost about twice as much. I'm personally quite content with the quality of my day care center.

We read that Korean women are experiencing equality in terms of educational opportunities. Is there equal access to opportunities and promotions in the work place for Korean women today?

When I was working for an automobile company, I was the only woman out of about 120 persons in the overseas sales division. There were a number of secretaries and clerks who were females; many of them were college educated. This was changing. They were bringing in more females during my last years with the company.

Is there still pressure on women to quit their jobs when they get married or become pregnant?

Yes, there is still pressure on women to quit their jobs when you get married or pregnant. Many women still view marriage as a security nest, and they prefer not to work. Many parents educate girls for the purpose of getting bright, well-educated husbands with a good income. By the 1970s and 1980s, most marriages were kind of half-arranged, but the females had the right to say "no." Today, many select their own spouse, but parents have connections and a lot of input.

What about the responsibility of women for the education of their children today? Are the fathers helping out more, are they assuming more of this responsibility?

The mothers still have more responsibility than the fathers, but the dads are helping out more than in the past. Korean men often associate with their colleagues after work hours and aren't home at dinner with their families, but this is changing as more women with children are continuing to work.

Does filial piety still serve to reinforce commitment to education as a means of demonstrating respect for the family unit?

Filial piety is still important in Korea. That involves the feeling that one must perform well for the family name or for the family's reputation. The basic duty to the family unit still remains. Filial piety is being eroded somewhat. The kids are more mature today and exposed to more influences. If you're a top student, you go with the system. If you're not succeeding academically, you're more tempted to ignore the system and the traditional expectations to do well for the family.

What do contemporary husbands think of wives who combine motherhood or marriage and careers?

In the past, the fathers were the sole bread winner, and the whole family depended on him. However, with the Asian financial crisis, many fathers were laid off from their jobs, making it very difficult for the families. In the old days, men wanted a stay-at-home wife. Today, however, men want their wives to have jobs so there is more income security. Some women who quit their jobs and stayed at home with the children later go into business; they open up a shop. Many women just take the government mandated two-and-one-half-month maternity leave and return to work. There are not many temporary jobs in Korea. Korean women and men look for a spouse with a good education and good job prospects. Today, many women are delaying marriage. Many are thirty before they marry. When I got married, twenty-six was the average.

Handout 2

SOUTH KOREA PLACING EDUCATION ON TOP OF THE FAMILY AGENDA

By Thomas R. Ellinger and Garry M. Beckham
(*Phi Delta Kappan*, 1997, April, pp. 624–25)

Although we may not agree with all aspects of the Korean mother's role in her child's education, we cannot deny that a strong family commitment and a demanding curriculum have been driving forces in Korean students' enviable academic achievement.

Overcoming a long history of Japanese rule and a devastating war, the small republic of South Korea (just 45 million people) has achieved transformations that took centuries in most nations in the West. With its push toward heavy industry—steel, construction, ship building, automobiles—and a substantial investment in high technology, South Korea has surpassed such regional rivals as Taiwan and has gone on to challenge both Japan and the United States. At the heart of this remarkable achievement is Korea's education system, which has been the major source of trained labor in the various fields and of skills needed for economic development.

Education in South Korea is compulsory through the sixth grade. However, most students continue through high school. Parents of high school students must pay tuition of approximately \$1,200 a year, a figure that could triple when one adds the additional costs of textbooks and private tutoring. Students in middle and high schools attend school Monday through Saturday (half a day on Saturday) for a total of 222 days. The school year runs from March to March, including a winter break from late December until the end of February. Class schedules resemble university schedules in the United States, with courses taught on alternate days. Students take required courses, including such subjects as ethics, math, biology, chemistry, physics, literature, grammar, a second language, composition, and technology and industry.

The days are long for Korean students. High schools students, for example, attend school from 8 a.m. till 4 p.m., but they return to study hall at 6 p.m. and do not leave before 10 p.m. During the day, poorly heated classrooms house an average of forty to fifty students, sitting at well-worn desks arranged in long straight rows. Evening study halls are conducted in equally cold rooms that seat 200 students. Students are hunched over tiny wooden desks, many of which are 1920 to 1940 vintage. After study hall, a Korean student's day is still not over; many of them view an educational television channel or work on homework assignments from 10:30 to midnight. Others attend evening *Hak gwan*—private institutes in which they receive supplementary academic lessons. Another important link in this intricate system is private tutoring. Educating people from all age groups, from retired people to university students, tutors share their special skills while earning supplemental income in the process. In the preschool and kindergarten years, students receive tutoring in such subjects as art and music. In elementary school, they receive private instruction in English, writing Korean, and music. While these tutoring sessions during the early years are mostly fun, once a student enters middle school the lessons become a vital component of his or her education.

Like everything else in Korea, education matters. South Koreans view education as they view the rest of life: a process of winning and losing. They have no concept of a game played well for its own sake. The family emphasis on educational achievement is so strong that it has been dubbed "education mania."

The driving force behind this education mania is the Korean mother, who has the primary responsibility for the education of her children. When a student enters school, his or her mother ensures that the youngster completes the homework assigned, provides help with instruction in such subjects as reading and writing, and oversees

the child's attendance at special after-school classes that supplement academics or provide enrichment. Once the student reaches middle school, the mother schedules every minute of her child's after-school time at special academies and institutes or in private tutoring.

To guarantee that she is well acquainted with her child's teacher, a Korean mother visits the school four or five times a year. During one of these visits, she will undoubtedly agree to the use of corporal punishment on her child if it is deemed necessary by the teacher, and she will promise to support the teacher if the child requires some prodding to complete the assignments.

Indeed, corporal punishment is quite common in Korea. The Korean Protection Agency has reported that all but 3 percent of the Korean children surveyed have experienced corporal punishment. Mothers administered most of the punishment. Although the children reported to researchers that they received corporal punishment most often because of fighting with their siblings, the second most common reason was not studying enough.

In Korea, both public and private high schools must follow the national curriculum. There are also special schools for the most accomplished students in science, foreign languages, music, and art. Admission to these schools is extremely competitive, and students must meet rigorous entrance requirements to be accepted by them.

But high school in general in Korea is a serious matter. Students are accustomed to getting by on no more than four hours of sleep, preceded by periodic visits from their mothers, who bring them coffee and remind them that, while they sleep, others are studying. Upon completion of high school, a student must not only have high grades, but also score very well on the National University Entrance Examination or *soo-nung*. Fierce competition for college entrance leaves its mark on students who fail their entrance examination, for they have done more than fail an exam; they have disgraced their families' honor.

In Korea, there is no question about who assumes responsibility for the child's education. The mother is clearly in charge. While we may not agree with all aspects of the Korean mother's role in her child's education, we cannot deny that a strong family commitment and a demanding curriculum have been driving forces in Korean students' enviable academic achievements.

Handout 3

WOMEN AT THE CROSSROADS

Five exercises with handouts and four special readings.
(*Korea: Lessons for High School Social Studies Courses*.
New York: Korea Society, 1999, pp. 129–55, 159–65.)

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