

## On the changing occupational roles of women in 20<sup>th</sup> century Korean society

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*The events that occurred in the Korean peninsula in the past 100 years, such as the conversion of Koreans to Christianity, which appealed to many women especially due to the fact that “it advocated human rights, social equality, and other democratic principles” (De Mente 2017, 661), the Japanese colonization of the country (1910-1945), which granted the Korean women the right to institutional education, and the rapid growth of industry starting with the early 1960s, a phenomenon that enabled young girls to work outside their houses as soon as they graduated from high school or college were important factors in the social emancipation of Korean women. This emancipation brought with it a change in the ‘jobs’ or ‘occupations’ women had, from more traditional ones, like jungmae (matchmakers), haenyeo (sea divers), to more modern ones, such as factory workers, university professors or office employees. The current paper aims to bring to the fore these changes by making use of primary data gathered from various novels authored by Korean and American-Korean, as well as secondary data (Statistics Korea), and to show that these changes are part and parcel of women’s liberation movement. The theoretical framework employed is content analysis (Baker 1994, Cohen et al. 2018), according to which the fragments excerpted from the novels will be categorized in terms of the occupational themes. The findings of the analysis will show that despite the fact that for a long period of time Korean women were enslaved, being confined in their parents’ or in-laws’ homes, their aspirations for better jobs, mainly held by men, were fulfilled only when they achieved a certain degree of social freedom.*

Key-words: *Korean feminist movement, Japanese colonization, women’s occupations, industrialization*

### 1. Introduction

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Korea was mainly an agrarian country, many of the lowborn women had to work next to men, disregarding the Confucian ideology, according to which women were confined to their houses. As Yu (1987, 17) reveals,

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“the widespread economic participation of lower-class women permitted greater freedom of conduct. Peasant women took part in farm labor and commoner women shared in cottage production, both selling goods in open markets.” Outside their domestic roles, ordinary Korean women had very few options: they could be *kungyo* (palace servants), *uinyo* (female physicians), *kisaeng* (entertainers) or *mudang* (shamans) (Koh, 1987). The women having these occupational roles were considered to be members of the lowest social class, but despite this, they had considerable power and influence in society. As Koh revealed, “[m]udang were especially powerful in the palace. Together with *uinyo* they were among the few persons who could witness the delivery of royal children” (1987, 32). Women of the *yangban*<sup>2</sup> class, on the other hand, had no alternatives at all, as neo-Confucianism imposed regulations that prohibited any inter-gender contact and forced women to spend most of their time at home and not to expose their faces to passers-by when they travelled (Han, 2004).

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a period of radical transformations in Korea, brought forth by a number of factors, among which worth mentioning are the opening of the borders of the Joseon kingdom to foreigners, the spread of Christianity especially among the lowborn citizens of the country, the occupation of the peninsula by the Japanese military and the subsequent colonization of the country, as well as the massive industrialization that started in the early 1960s. These events enabled women to enter the ‘public’ domains that were traditionally assigned to men. According to Cho (1987, 47),

[d]uring that time the participation of women in the labor force has increased and educational opportunities for women have been expanded. The female labor force has increased in numbers as well as in quality, although their occupational ranking and pay scale have remained low compared to those of males. The majority of female workers are young, unmarried, and in low-paying jobs.

In this article I shall narrow down the time span of investigation of the Korean female occupational roles to the past 100 years, moving from the traditional to the more modern jobs. The structure of the paper is the following: section 2 offers an overview of the theoretical framework employed. The research methodology and research questions are presented in section 3. In the analytical part of the paper (section 4) the fragments excerpted from various novels about Korea will be discussed in terms of the themes identified on the basis of *content analysis*. Finally, section 5 contains some conclusions.

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<sup>2</sup> *Yangban* represented the elite of the Korean society.

## 2. Basic concepts in *content analysis*

The theoretical framework which seemed most appropriate for the current study is a simplified version of *content analysis*, defined as “the process of summarizing and reporting written data – the main contents of data and their messages.” (Cohen *et al.* 2018, 674) This method of analysis has a wide-ranging application and its goal “is never just description; rather, the analyzed content must be related to (...) factors about documents, about persons stating the content, about the intended audience, or about the times in which the content was produced (Baker 1994, 268).

Drisko and Maschi (2016) speak of three subtypes of content analysis, namely *basic content analysis*, which focuses on content and makes use of statistical analyses, *interpretive content analysis*, defined by Krippendorff (2013) (quoted in Drisko and Maschi 2016, 58) as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts [...] to the contexts of their use”, and *qualitative content analysis*, “a form of analysis for verbal and visual data oriented towards summarizing the informational content of the data set” (Sandelowski 2000, quoted in Drisko and Maschi 2016, 86). From among these three versions of content analysis, I have opted for the last due to the fact that it allowed me to gather the data and analyze it simultaneously, as well as to easily describe the patterns or ‘themes’ identified in the data set.

The data used by researchers in content analysis could be in the form of artifacts, visual or recorded materials, or printed material. For the current study, I have selected a sample of novels (or “content”) to be analyzed, which are representative for the investigated topic and which have “a clear historical time frame” (Baker 1994, 106), namely 20<sup>th</sup> century Korea. These novels (or ‘texts’) are actually “written communicative materials which are intended to be read and understood by people other than the analysts” (Krippendorp 2004, quoted in Cohen *et al.* 2018, 674).

Since content analysis is employed to test some hypothesis, “the content must be representative of some universe for which a population can be defined and a sample drawn” (Baker 1994, 268). Thus, I consider that the selected novels are relevant for the topic under investigation and representative of the Korean culture of the past 100 years, despite the fact that each of them deals with various aspects of the peninsular culture.

### 3. Research methodology

The primary data I have employed in this particular paper are fragments excerpted from the following novels, authored by Korean, American-Korean and British-Korean writers, which are listed in chronological order: Helie Lee - *Still Life with Rice* (1997), Nora Okja Keller - *Comfort Woman* (1997), Samuel Park - *This Burns My Heart* (2011), Kyung-Sook Shin - *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* (2015), Nam-Joo Cho - *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (2018), and Mary Lynn Bracht - *White Chrysanthemum* (2018). The reason for this choice as a main source of *content* is the fact that “[r]eports of labor statistics in Korea (mostly from government sources) suffer from limitations imposed by the inadequacy of data in terms of the coverage of work and the way they are aggregated and disaggregated” (Cho 1987, 85). At the same time, literature is rooted in the problems of life and, as Shin put it, “literature is about excavating the past that flows through to the present” (2015, 57).

Once the sample data has been selected, the next step was to break down the novels into smaller units of analysis, i.e. fragments/paragraphs and to ascribe them names, in the current study these being the various occupational roles of the Korean women. This is what Cohen *et al.* (2018) and Baker (1994) call *coding*, i.e. “the ascription of a category label to a piece of data, decided in advance or in response to the data that have been collected” (Cohen *et al.*, 2018, 668). The categories I have identified are as follows: matchmakers, fortune-tellers, *haenyeo*, shaman, midwives, *ch’iryō* healers, factory workers, white-collar workers, and professors. The information obtained from the novels was backed up by data from secondary sources.

The hypothesis that guided the analysis is that the changes in the women’s occupational roles in the Korean society of the past century go parallel to the transformations the peninsular country suffered. Derived from this, the following research questions have been formulated:

- 1) To what extent has Christianity contributed to the improvement of the women’s status and, hence, to a weakening of the barrier between sexes that led to women’s employment in jobs preponderantly held by men?
- 2) Have the more modern women’s occupations been enabled by a diminishing of the influence of Confucianism in the past century?
- 3) Will there ever be true equality in the Korean workforce between males and females in terms of occupational roles?

Let us now turn to the presentation of the occupational themes identified in the above-mentioned novels. I shall start with the more traditional occupations,

encountered among the Korean women at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and continue with the more modern ones.

#### 4. Traditional versus modern occupations of Korean women

##### 4.1. Traditional roles/occupations

In the traditional Korean society of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women had set roles, imposed to a certain extent by the Confucian ideology. They were expected to stay at home in order to look after the family: to raise their children, to keep house, to prepare meals and to tend to their in-laws' needs. In the farming villages, Korean women also helped their husbands in the fields. But some of them, apart from being involved in the house chores, had additional occupations. One such occupation was that of a **matchmaker**, which we encounter in Helie Lee's novel *Still Life with Rice* (1997). This is the story of the authoress's maternal grandmother - Hongyong -, spanning between 1912 and 1991 and over a number of places: Pyongyang, China, North Korea, South Korea, and America. In the 1920s, when Hongyong's Older Brother<sup>3</sup> reached the age of marriage, his father started looking for a matchmaker:

- (1) The union of marriage was too important a decision to let young hearts choose for themselves, so a matchmaker was called in to select a bride for Older Brother. (...) The old withered matchmaker searched villages near and far for a suitable bride from the same *yangban* breeding. (Lee, 1997: 49)

Matchmakers "were usually older women who had a large network of contacts within a particular social circle" (Tudor 2012, 311). The task of a matchmaker was to search for a suitable wife, possibly from the same social class like the groom, in close or distant villages, making sure that they do not come from the same lineage. They would usually describe the prospective bride in bright colors<sup>4</sup>, in order to be paid handsomely, but quite often reality proved the opposite, as it happened in the case of Hongyong's Older Brother.

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<sup>3</sup> Koreans do not use given names when addressing or talking about people. They rather use relational terms (such as Crippled Sister, Second Sister, Older Brother) or titles (*songsaenim*). As *Hangeul*, the Korean alphabet, does not make use of capital letters/symbols, in the English translations of the novels the translators made use of capitalization of the relational terms as a substitute of names.

<sup>4</sup> Divining the qualities of the bride is known as *napkil* (de Mente 2017, 647).

- (2) 'You are a very lucky boy.' The matchmaker winked. 'I have found the most beautiful bride for you right here in our province. Hips so wide<sup>5</sup>, she will give you many offspring.' (Lee 1997, 49)

"Matchmakers were also skilled in astrological matters and could advise the couple and their parents when the match appeared to be especially favorable for all concerned" (de Mente 2017, 647). Finding a match for a future groom is apparently a good work. It is believed among matchmakers that "if you make three marriages, you will go to Heaven" (Kendall 1996, 5).

Another traditional occupation of the Korean women was that of **midwives**. In the above-mentioned novel, when Hongyong, the main character was to give birth to her first child, she returned to her parent's home<sup>6</sup>, where she was helped to deliver the baby by her mother. Mother also helped the other two daughters of hers when they were in the same situation. There was, nevertheless, one condition that Korean women needed to fulfill in order to be a midwife, namely to have given birth to a couple of sons. The fragment excerpted from Lee's novel illustrates how well organized the household was in such circumstances.

- (3) When the time arrived, the entire household sprang into action. Having three married daughters, Mother and Father had accumulated plenty of practice over the years and groomed the servants and residents to work as a well-oiled birthing machine. The men retired to the men's quarters to await the news and the women went to theirs, for the birth of a child was our domain. (Lee 1997, 105).

Starting with the 1960s, women would more frequently give birth in hospitals, a modern change the female members of the previous generation, like Hongyong, could not agree with. After the Korean War, it was only the poor women who delivered the babies at home. Nowadays, as women of all social conditions and financial means choose to give birth in hospitals, rather than at home, the traditional midwives have disappeared altogether.

In 1939, when the Korean society was repressed toward complete Japanization, many Koreans fled for China, hoping to be protected from the

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<sup>5</sup> One of the many Korean women's attributes which would be indicative of their potential to give birth to sons was the large size of the hips. Such a characteristic was considered to be more important than their beauty.

<sup>6</sup> In the Korean society it was customary for the newly-wed bride to live with her husband's family (Korea was a patrilocal society). The only time she was allowed to visit her own family was when she had to give birth to children, as she would be helped by her own mother.

Japanese. In the new homeland, women could find work more easily than men, becoming thus the breadwinners in the family, which for some Korean men was a blow to their masculine pride, as according to Confucianism, men should work outside the house, while women inside. One such 'untypical' family is that of Dukpil and Hongyong (from Lee's novel *Still Life with Rice*). When the Japanese colonization threatened the Koreans' well being in their own country, Dukpil left for China, being followed after some time by his wife and their two children. When Hongyong reached China, she saw that Chinese women worked beside their husbands. This encouraged her to suggest to her husband opening a business with sesame oil and, thus, she became a **businesswoman**.

- (4) 'Before, I felt it was a woman's place to restrain her thoughts concerning a man's affairs. Here, when I browse through the marketplace, I see women like myself working beside their husbands. Their sweat inspires me to support you with the same loyalty.'  
'You do, do you?' he teased.  
'If you feel I am incapable, I will not be offended. A wife's duty is to maintain just the household affairs. I beg your pardon for speaking beyond my position.'  
'You, incapable? That is the last thing I think of you.' He paused for a second before finishing his thought. 'All these years you have been my wife you have not once failed me. I fear I may lose face if I fail you, but I am willing to go in the sesame business if you desire it.' (Lee 1997, 112)

The sesame oil business flourished. Dukpil would sell the oil to more distant places in China like Peking and Chugging. The money they made was huge, but it had changed them. As she became prosperous, Hongyong wanted more and more money, forgetting about the family and about the duties she had as a wife and mother. As she confessed:

- (5) I was so happy I got pregnant again. The news was accepted with mixed emotions. I knew it was my prime duty, but my mind and heart were not focused on the birth as they were with the other two. I did not sew clothes or fantasize about the coming child. Instead, I obsessed about returning to work and ridding my body of the extra pounds. *I was becoming a different woman*. Before, I had been fulfilled by childbirth, eating, sleeping, love. Not any longer. I thirsted more. (Lee 1997, 114)

After her third child's *paikil*<sup>7</sup>, Hongyong started to work again, but she was no longer satisfied with the sesame oil business and wanted to expand. She had heard about the white powder (opium) and that it brought good money. But the opium trade was dominated by the Japanese; "they were the manufacturers, Koreans were the dealers, and Chinese were the users" (Lee 1997, 115). This was a pretty dangerous business, as those who were caught by the Japanese soldiers were killed. Still, Hongyong (just like many other Korean women migrants in China) was determined to take the risk, despite her husband's plea to give up the idea. The inventiveness of these female traffickers is to be admired: some introduced rubber tubes containing opium inside their private parts, but Hongyong found other means of hiding the powder:

- (6) I lined the bottom of my breasts with three tubes each and secured them with strips of fabric. (...) The other four tubes I coiled inside my hat, which I pinned to my head. (Lee 1997, 119)

When she went into large-scale opium business, her tactics changed/improved:

- (7) Once a month I rode the train to Chungedo, hauling back enough powder to seduce a whole village. I smuggled it in tin lunch pails, lacing the bottoms with opium. On top of the opium I laid a thin sheet of paper, then covered it with rice, seasoned fish, and *bulkogi*, barbecued beef. It was a brilliant plan, I thought, as I guided my cart past many police roadblocks and checkpoints. (Lee 1997, 121)

The hectic life of Hongyong took the toll on her health. Thus, after she gave birth to her fourth baby in China, her health deteriorated so badly that she had to hire a wet nurse. Seeing the suffering of the fresh mother, the wet nurse told Hongyong that she could cure her by means of a traditional practice called *ch'iryō*. Hongyong was skeptical in the beginning, but having no other option, she consented to being treated by the wet nurse, as Western medicine and shamanistic rituals had not yielded any result. The *ch'iryō* procedure is described below:

- (8) Swiftly she prepared a place for me to lie before her. After another moment of resistance, I peeled off my waist jacket and skirt, lifted the slip to my chest as she requested.

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<sup>7</sup> *Paikil* or the child's one-hundredth day is an important celebration in the Korean culture.

Instead of clapping, as I had imagined, she began to slap the skin around my lower stomach. As the speed and pressure intensified, her palm felt hot against my stinging flesh. I flinched and cursed, but her free hand and legs pinned me down. Steadily, she slapped on, moving with more power, as if her hand possessed some mystical force. (Lee 1997, 139)

This treatment left the patient bruised and with more pain than before, so that Hongyong felt like lashing the wet-nurse, who, sensing the danger, left the house and did not show up for a number of days. But as her condition improved afterwards, Hongyong forgot all about the pain caused by the treatment and sent a message to the woman's husband. When the wet nurse returned, Hongyong wanted to find out the name of the practice and how it works. This is the description of how procedure impacts the human body:

- (9) Blood is the food of life. It must flow like water. If it becomes polluted and muddy it will slow the body and eventually shut down. By slapping or pinching the flesh over and over again, it generates heat and energy and draws the bad blood to rise to the surface, thus the bruises. When this happens, the blood is cleansed, making it easier to travel freely throughout the body. (...) *ch'iryō* helps to unclog the valves so the heart may function properly. That's why it is essential to always treat the areas around the heart and neck well. (Lee 1997, 139)

As after a month of treatment, Hongyong felt like a different person, she started practicing *ch'iryō* on herself, then on her husband and children, as well as on her Crippled Sister.

After the premature death of her beloved husband at the age of 38, Hongyong, who had returned to Korea, where she tried to find work in order to support her family. All the wealth they had accumulated in China got lost, so she could hardly give her husband a decent burial. As she was now pretty good at *ch'iryō*, she wanted to practice it, but people were either skeptical about the treatment or would not have the means to reward Hongyong. In the end, in Busan she comes to work at the lepers' hospital, helping a lot of people without being afraid to get the disease. But after a couple of months, her niece (Hongyong's Crippled Sister's daughter) came to see her and to ask her to return home to her children and to help her mother who was not feeling well. Crippled Sister, realizing the benefits of *ch'iryō* started treating herself and, miraculously, after many years of being carried by her husband and children, managed to walk.

Among other patients Hongyong treated as a *ch'iryō* practitioner was the son of a farmer “who danced clumsily as he balanced himself on one bent leg and then another” (Lee 1997, 286) and who eventually entered the renowned Seoul University, as well as a well-off couple. The latter, being extremely happy with the results of the treatment, bought Hongyong a house where she could live with her children and where she could continue to treat other persons.

Moving now from mainland Korea to Jeju island<sup>8</sup>, we encounter another occupation that the Korean women were famous for, namely *haenyeo* or **sea divers**. This occupation is presented in Mary Lynn Bracht's novel titled *White Chrysanthemum* (2018), a literary masterpiece that describes the hardships of the Koreans' life under Japanese occupation, focusing on comfort women. Briefly, it is the story of two sisters, Hana, aged 16 and her little sibling, Emiko. As the Japanese were abducting young Korean girls to use them as sexual slaves in the so-called 'comfort stations', Hana saves her sister from becoming a comfort woman by letting herself be caught by the Japanese on the shore of Jeju island. For the topic of the current paper the novel is important in the sense that it brings to the fore a woman's occupation that is typical of the afore-mentioned geographical area, namely sea divers or *haenyeo*. Both Hana and her mother are women of the sea and they work for themselves. As the Japanese were controlling all the people's activities on the island, the sea divers had to find a place hidden from the enemy's sight, so most of the *haenyeo* would “dive in a cove hidden from the main road that leads into town” (Bracht 2018, 5). As the British authoress of Korean descent puts it, this 'job' gave the *haenyeo* “a sense of freedom not many on the other side of the island, or even on the mainland Korea, hundred miles to the north, enjoy” (Bracht 2018, 5-6). The fragment below describes what being a woman of the sea involved:

- (10) On Hana's island, diving is women's work. Their bodies suit the cold depths of the ocean better than men's. They can hold their breath longer, swim better, and keep their body temperature warmer, so for centuries Jeju women have enjoyed a rare independence. Hana followed her mother into the sea at an early age. (...) She was nearly eleven the first time her mother took her into the deeper waters and showed her how to cut abalone from a rock on the sea floor. (...) Hana swam to the buoy and added her abalone to her mother's catch, which was stowed safely in a net. Then she performed her own somersault, down into the ocean's thrumming interior, in search of another sea creature to add to their harvest. (Bracht 2018, 6-7)

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<sup>8</sup> Jeju is a famous island in the southern part of South Korea.

In order to become a *haenyeo*, young girls had to train with their mothers or grandmothers, as was Hana's case. A professional sea diver had to know lots of things, such as the sea floor, what fish or other seafood was available, the winds that blew over the ocean, as well as the tide. This is a very dangerous activity, the *haenyeo* having to cross the line between life and death every day, as a minor obstacle might endanger their lives. During the Japanese occupation, the *haenyeo* were unfairly taxed for each day's catch. Despite this, they always managed

- (11) (...) to bring in more and more with each new decree, feeding themselves nevertheless. It meant remaining out on the water for longer hours and risking their lives even during bad weather, but with increased peril came pride in their hard work and earned success. They were colonized only in name. (Bracht 2018, 96-97)

What the *haenyeo* would harvest from the ocean floor were sea urchins, abalone, squid, octopus, and conch shells, which they would sell in the market in order to get money to feed their families. This activity was performed all year round, on specific days and for a certain amount of time, depending on the season. Thus, while in winter women would stay in the water for one hour, in summer they could spend even up to three hours.

As Hana's mother told their daughters, diving is a gift. But when they went searching for seafood, *haenyeo* would never go alone, despite their excellent diving skills. There was a strong camaraderie among them, which meant that they communicated among themselves at the bottom of the ocean and also protected each other:

- (12) The women keep an eye on one another as they dive. They have trained themselves to watch out for those diving nearest them, in case one of them gets into difficulty. *Mulsum*, water-breath, means death for *haenyeo*. (Bracht 2018, 20)

Sometime after Hana's abduction by the Japanese soldiers, Emiko, her younger sister started diving with her mother, an activity she would perform her entire life until shortly before her death. But while initially, just like her mother and sister Hanna, she dived in a simple swimming costume called *musojungi*, without any kind of equipment except the net in which she placed her catch and the buoy the net was attached to, old Emiko and her *haenyeo* comrades started making use of fins, wetsuits and masks, which made the diving much easier. So, modern times brought with them changes in the way sea-diving was practiced. But modern times

also led to a dwindling of the number of sea women on Jeju island, as many of them preferred to do something less dangerous as a living and moved to the mainland, as we shall see a little later in connection with Emi's daughter. Worth mentioning is the fact that in March 2021, the Australian National Maritime Museum celebrated the International Women's Day by organizing an exhibition dedicated to the Korean *haenyeo* ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z\\_elohAJiU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_elohAJiU)). Also, worth pointing out is the fact that apart from their desire to sacrifice their lives, the Korean *haenyeo* also need to be admired for their utmost strength, despite the fact that, as human beings, they were very fragile.

Another traditional (but also modern) occupational role the Korean women played is that of **shamans**. Shamanism has been an important part of the spiritual Korean culture for a long time. Shamans "claim they can contact spirits of all kinds, both good and bad, and use this skill to help others in crises" (Pratt and Rutt 2013, 413). In the Korean culture female shamans are called *mudang*, whereas the male ones *paksu*. The term *mudang* refers to a shaman by individual calling<sup>9</sup>. According to Pratt and Rutt (2013, 295), the rites performed by the shamans "range from those of general importance, as at lunar new year, to the more particular, such as the worship of local folk heroes, invocation of blessings (on threatened crops, for example, or for rescue from sickness), and exorcism." Additionally, shamans can be called in to treat unfulfilled desires for marriage and children (Kendall 1989) or "to restore a harmonious relationship with their [the Koreans'] gods and ancestors" (Kendall 2009, 3).

The Koreans' use of shamans has been encountered in a couple of novels. Thus, in Bracht's (2018) *White Chrysanthemum*, Hana's initiation as a *haenyeo* had to be sanctioned by a shaman. The ritual is described in the excerpt below:

- (13) It's early dawn, and the semi-darkness casts strange shadows along the footpath. (...) She is following her mother down to the sea. (...) On the shore, a handful of women are already waiting for them. She recognizes their faces in the rising dawn light, but the shaman is a stranger. The holy woman wears a red and royal blue traditional *hanbok* dress, and as soon as they descend upon the lane, the shaman begins to dance. The huddling figures step away from her twirling motions and form into a small group, mesmerized by the shaman's grace. She chants a greeting to the Dragon Sea God, welcoming him to their island, beckoning him to travel through the bamboo gates towards Jeju's tranquil shores. (...) It is a forbidden ceremony, outlawed by

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<sup>9</sup> According to Kister (2004), Korean women could become shamans in two ways: either as a result of an illness, which leaves them with the powers of communicating to gods and spirits, or by 'inheritance', which means that they might have had a shaman in their ancestry.

the occupying Japanese government, but her mother is insistent upon holding a traditional *gut*<sup>10</sup> for safety and a bountiful catch. As the shaman repeats the words over and over, Hana's mother nudges her shoulder and together they bow, foreheads touching the wet sand to honor the Dragon Sea God's imminent arrival. (Bracht 2018, 1-2)

In Lee's *Still Life With Rice* (1997), a shaman was called for to rescue Hongyong's Second Sister from sickness. When Second Sister turned four, her health deteriorated badly, becoming physically impaired (hence the term of address *Crippled Sister* used for her in the novel), their parents called a shaman, a herbalist and the best physician, but to no avail.

- (14) Mother persuaded Father to send for a shaman to drive away the evil spirits that had invaded Second Sister's body. The shaman woman made offering of food and wine as she flirted and sang and danced for them. When that too failed, she sacrificed our prized chicken, slicing its head right off. Obviously, the spirits were neither hungry nor in the mood to be seduced, for Second Sister's condition only worsened, which tormented Mother. (Lee, 1997, 43)

As the fragment illustrates, female shamans would get into the trance state in which they were able to communicate with the spirits only through music and dance, while their practices included the offering of gifts to the spirits (in the form of food and drinks). "The trance may induce possession by a spirit, though a Korean shaman often has a conversation in which there is recurrent possession, her own words alternating with those of the spirit" (Pratt and Rutt 2013, 413).

Initiation into shamanism begins with a "chronic illness or affliction that reveals the inner gift of clear-sightedness (a sign of a calling to the vocation) in the afflicted person" (Namba Walter and Fridman 2004, 952). During the illness a spirit journey is experienced in a dream or trance. This is the case of Akiko, the heroine in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997). The novel depicts the atrocities of WWII and its disturbing effects on a later generation. At the same time, it is a touching story of mother-daughter relationship that survives these atrocities, madness and death, which moves the readership in its evocation of feminine closeness. In brief, the main character of the story is Akiko<sup>11</sup> (Kim Soon-Hyo), a young Korean woman who was sold to serve as a comfort woman in the Japanese "recreation camps". After the war, in her attempt to escape the scene of torture (Japan), she marries an

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<sup>10</sup> *Gut* / *Kut* is a shamanistic ritual.

<sup>11</sup> Comfort women were given Japanese names. Akiko is the heroine's Japanese name, whereas Kim Soon-Hyo is her Korean name, the family name coming first.

American missionary, who takes her to America, where she gives birth to their daughter, Beccah, a child she loves with all her heart but from whom she hides her traumatic past. This secret prevents Akiko from expressing her love to her daughter and, eventually, causes her to find relief from her pain in communicating with the spirits of the dead.

Akiko's life could be described as continuous alternations of 'normal times', as Beccah calls them, with periods when spirits claimed her. As Beccah recounts:

- (15) When the spirits called her, my mother would leave me and slip inside herself, to somewhere I could not and did not want to follow. It was as if the mother I knew turned off, checked out, and someone else came to rent the space. During this time, the body of my mother would float through our one-bedroom apartment, slamming into walls and bookshelves and bumping into the corner of the coffee table and the television. (Keller 1997, 4)

Occasionally, in her trance, Akiko would shout to the spirits that descended upon her: Induk, the Birth Grandmother and Saja, the Death Messenger (Keller, 1997). In the beginning, she would dance to her own internal music, flailing her arms and her knees pumping into her chest, and making such noise that her neighbor threatened her a number of times she would call the police. While in one of these states, she is visited by her employer, Mrs. DeSilva-Chung (Auntie Reno), who came to complain that Akiko had not come to work for a number of days. In her trance and seeing Auntie Reno, Akiko says to her:

- (16) 'Why have you come here? Dirty person from a house full of mourning, tend to your own mother: Teeth are biting at her head, and rats are nesting at her feet.'

Auntie Reno gasped. 'What dah hell dat crazy woman saying?'

'Bad girl, bad daughter!' Rolling into a crouch, my mother yelled at Reno. 'You pretend to take care of her, wiping her drool and her *gundinghi*, but you only wished for her to die! You only wish to save money for yourself. You wouldn't buy your mother a decent bed in life, and look, now you won't buy her one in death.' (Keller 1997, 8)

Hearing things that, she knows, are true and, at the same time, shocking, Reno wants to leave, but Akiko continues to reveal some other truths about her past. When Beccah tries to excuse her mother by saying that she is ill, in the hope that Auntie Reno will not fire her, the latter admits that most of the things Akiko said were true and states with amazement:

- (17) Your maddah might be one crazy lady (...), but she got dah gift. (...) All my life, I heard about people like dis. You know, my maddah said dis kinda thing supposed to run in our family, but I neveh seen anyone wit dah gift dis strong. (...) Some people – not many – get dah gift of talking to the dead, of walking true worlds and seeing things one regulah person like you or me don't even know about. Dah spirits love these people, tellin' em for 'do this, do that'. But they hate em, too, jealous of dah living. (Keller 1997, 9)

Realizing she could use Akiko's powers to make some additional money, Auntie Reno became Akiko's 'manager', providing her with customers who were in desperate need of shamanistic help. Word travelled so fast that soon the waiting list became longer and longer and the customers' waiting time equally long. It seems that Auntie Reno was familiar with the items needed for such shamanistic rites (*kut*) and also with the garments Akiko needed to wear during the rituals, as the fragment below reveals:

- (18) Auntie Reno, who asserted the atmosphere was just as important as ability, hung bells and chimes and long banners of *kanji* on our walls. When I asked her what the characters meant, she shrugged. 'Good luck, double happiness, something like that'.  
Then, we'd catch my mother, dress her in a long white or blue or yellow robe – whichever one we could throw over her body without protest from the spirits – and turn on the music that would start my mother dancing. She liked heavy drumbeats, and once she got going, my mother could tell all about a person and the wishes of the dead that circled around her. (Keller 1997, 10)

As Pratt and Rutt (2013, 296) confirm, "[t]he *mudang* dresses in the clothes of the opposite sex, often with iron ornaments. She dances simple steps while a small band of drum and pipes plays incessantly, and she (...) sings and declaims. The noise may continue from sunset to dawn, with the *mudang* changing her costume according to the spirit in whose possession she claims to be."

The world of the spirits becomes Akiko sanctuary, her means of surviving her past as a comfort woman. She escapes the pain of not being able to show her love to her daughter through her trances and, ultimately through her death. In one of her trances, Akiko talked to the spirits of all her relatives in Korea but she also confessed having been one of the comfort women. She recorded this talk for her daughter to find out the truth about her past life and her real Korean name: Soon Hyo. Eventually, Beccah becomes a shaman herself, starting to speak with the spirit of her mother.

## 4.2. Modern roles/occupations of the Korean women

After the liberation of Korea from Japanese colonizers and after the Korean War (1950-1953), the idea of gender equality gained some attention. The Constitution of the Republic of Korea, first promulgated in 1948, included a provision for equality between the sexes, which enabled more women to attend school. Still, the greater public role of women clashed with the dominant ideology that defined a woman's place and valued male power within society.

As Kim (1997, 2) stated,

[t]he transformation of South Korea's economy during the past three decades has been termed an 'economic miracle'. In a single generation, the country has changed from a poor rural nation, dependent on foreign assistance, to one of the most dynamic manufacturing economies in the world. Essential to this transformation has been South Korea's low-paid but highly productive and well-disciplined labor force.

When Korea started industrializing in the early 1960s, the country witnessed an exodus of males and young females from rural areas to cities to find jobs in factories. As far as the female laborers are concerned, they were young and unmarried and they were hired primarily in unskilled jobs in labor-intensive industries such as electronics 55.2%, textiles 72.4% and rubber footwear 52.4% (according to Choi 1983, quoted in Kim 1997, 3). Despite the fact that they represented the majority of workers in the afore-mentioned domains, they received lower wages than their male peers, this gender-gap difference being still in force today.

The image of **female factory workers** is genuinely portrayed in Kyung-Sook Shin's literary masterpiece *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* (2015). This is an autobiographical novel in which Shin presents her nation's transition to an industrial country and the Korean people's struggle to adapt to a new society. The plot covers 16 years: it starts when the authoress, a 16-year-old country girl, arrived in Seoul to work in a factory (Dongnam Electronics), on a stereo-assembly line and it ends when she is 32 years of age and already famous.

In Dongnam Electronics, teen-aged Kyung-Sook Shin and her Cousin (whose name is never mentioned) work and suffer together. They are not called by their names<sup>12</sup>, but by the number of the place they work on the conveyor line (i.e.

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<sup>12</sup> In Korea, women are not customarily called by their given names. While living with their parents, they will be addressed as X's daughter, if they are married they are called either Z's wife or Y's mother (if they have children).

Number One, for instance). They work overtime every day, without any kind of compensation, and when they fall ill, they run the risk of being fired<sup>13</sup>. Yu Chae-ok, the forewoman of the prep division fights against the head of production (a man), who wants to fire one of the female employees, Miss Choe, who left home without working extra hours the night before:

- (19) Yu Chae-ok shouts at him (...): ‘Are we machines? Why are you treating us like this? Does it make any sense that you demand a resignation from Miss Choe because she went home with a nosebleed after 5 days of overtime?’ (Shin 2015, 62)

This attitude is explained in terms of women’s subordination within the workplace, which derives from the “traditional hierarchical relationship between the genders that permeated society outside the workplace” (Kim 1997, 7).

Not only are young female workers threatened with being fired, but they are also paid less than their male counterparts. According to the Kuyng-Sook Shin, in 1978, “the minimum wages for trainee factory positions held by women was 24,000 won” (2015, 50). After deducting rent, lunch costs, the money sent home or given to their male siblings, they were left with an average of 19,400 won. An additional problem they faced was the delay of the payment:

- (20) All we know is that if our pay is delayed, everyone’s life turns into a mess. Because our pay is our entire living allowance. If our pay is delayed, our rent is delayed and we are left with no money to send back home, no money left to scrape to put away in our savings. (Shin 2015, 81)

Worth a mention in connection with this paragraph is derived from Neo-Confucianism, a doctrine that is still an important element of the Korean culture, which preached (among other issues), filial piety. Thus, female workers were encouraged to behave as dutiful daughters to their parents, which in the industrialization context meant contributing financially to their families in the countryside and also providing for the financial needs of their male siblings. In Kyung-Sook Shin’s novel, *An Hyang-suk*, one of the authoress’s school mates, works in a confectionery factory, where she wraps by hand 22,000 candies a day. But despite the fact that the girl is happy to have this job and to be able to financially help her family, the repetitive and exhausting work takes its toll on the girl’s health:

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<sup>13</sup> The reason why female workers were dismissed so easily was the fact that their employers regarded “factory work as a transition phase before women took up their primary adult roles of wives and mothers” (Kim 1997, 7).

- (21) At first, the job was fun, you know, it didn't even feel like work. After a few days, though, I began to bleed, right here where you squeeze the plastic wrapper, then twist. (...) The skin calloused now, so there's no more bleeding, but a couple of years ago, this finger stopped working, that's why I write with my left hand. (Shin 2015, 117)

Irrespective of the place they worked in, young female workers in Korea were victims of sexual violence. Thus, at Dongnam Electronics, foreman Lee, a married man, had a go on Kyung-Sook Shin's Cousin (he tried to kiss her). The same person took advantage of another girl, who got pregnant and had to resign her position in the company. Sexual violence occurs because of the inferior social and economic status of the female workers as opposed to the male workers. At the same time, male superiors considered rape some kind of 'corrective' measure, meant to make women more obedient and work harder.

Having experienced all kinds of injustice, Korean women started joining the Union, in an attempt to have their rights protected. They penned a petition claiming compensation allowance for menstruation leave, salary raise, putting an end to the oppression of workers (Shin 2015, 63–69). Apparently, the boldness of the female factory workers to organize themselves into a Union and to demand their rights stirred the rage of the men, who tried by any means to dissolve the union.

- (22) The production supervisor pressured a female worker to quit the union but when she refused, he forced her into the warehouse and raped her. The female worker reported everything to the union. But the management sued *her*, accusing her of trying to frame an innocent man. (Shin 2015, 114)

The desire to rise above this social status made many of the factory workers enroll in night classes, to further their education. They were all aware of the fact that education helps people enjoy a better life. This proved true for Kyun-Sook Shin, who became a renowned writer, as well as for her Cousin, whose teen-age dream was to be a photographer, a job held preponderantly by men. What is important to understand in connection with these young female factory workers is their attempt to "both accommodate and resist the dominating forces of global capitalism and patriarchy" (Kim 1997, 1). On the one hand, these women participated in the workforce of industrial factories, on the other hand they tried to stick to the conventional family structure highly influenced by Confucianism, which requires that they should marry and become mothers, two paths that result in social conflict. Worth mentioning is the fact that young factory workers like Kyung-Sook Shin, her Cousin, Miss Lee, and many others had to cope both with economic and

social marginalization, trying to find their place in the hierarchical Korean society and to figure out strategies for a better future (this is the reasons why they enrolled in night classes). In my opinion, the strong Confucian tradition has been (and still is) a major obstacle to women's full integration in the workplace and in the Korean society as a whole, as it sustains gender inequality.

Many of the Korean young women of the second half of the previous century dreamt of being *shin yeonseong* ("New Woman"), i.e. women equipped with education, who wore Western clothes and shoes, and who attempted to find a job corresponding to their qualification. An example of such a New Woman could be Soo-Ja, the heroine in Samuel Park's novel *This Burns My Heart* (2011). While a college student, she applied for a scholarship without her parents' consent, as her dream was to become a diplomat and to travel around the world. Such a profession was out of the question for a young Korean woman of the 1960s. On finding out about her intention, her mother suggested to her to choose between being a teacher or a secretary (professions that also require higher education). This shows that while Soo-Ja wanted to try out a new profession, her parents stuck to the traditional ones, which they considered more appropriate for a woman. Moreover, Soo-Ja's parents' discontent with their daughter's dream was enhanced by the fact that if she were to study to become a diplomat, she had to move from Daegu to Seoul, to be on her own, and this would have brought criticism to the family.

(23) 'You must be out of your mind to think you are going to Seoul', said Soo-Ja's mother (...). 'What would people say if we let you go alone in a strange city? (...) We have to protect you. What do you think would happen with no one to watch out for you? What would our friend and business associates say if they heard we let you go to Seoul on your own? They'd think we've gone mad, that we are incompetent parents.' (Park 2011, 14-15)

A way out of this situation was for Soo-Ja to marry Min, a *myot-yanggi*, as she herself thought of him at first, "a flashy, vain person, showing off goods, wealth, or physique" (Park 2011, 8), who promised her that they would move together to Seoul and would allow her to study as a diplomat. But after their marriage, he apparently changed his mind. As Min suffered from back problems, he never worked, so his wife became the breadwinner of the family. After a number of years spent with her in-laws who treated her badly, Soo-Ja decides to move to Seoul, where she starts working as a **receptionist in a hotel**, to eventually become the

hotel manager. In Seoul, she gave up wearing the *hanbok*<sup>14</sup> and, instead, started wearing Western clothes.

- (24) She herself wore a yellow silk blouse with ruffled trim along the buttons, and a long beaded necklace hanging down her waist, just above her red polyester pants. She didn't wear handbook anymore – she thought only maids and old people stuck to it. Western fashions seemed to be all the rage, especially American and French – miniskirts, bright colors, and even things like gold spangles (...). (Park 2011, 161)

At the hotel, Soo-Ja worked twelve hours a day and, as a woman, she was exposed to her male customers' rudeness. One such customer was a certain Mr. Shim, who started making advances on Soo-Ja:

- (25) 'You are very pretty, *agassi*<sup>15</sup>, he said, calling her a miss and staring at her from the other side of the counter.  
'It's not *agassi*, it's *ajumma*<sup>16</sup>. I'm a married woman,' Soo-Ja sharply replied.  
'That can't be the truth. If you had a husband, he wouldn't let you work as a hotel hostess, and let men steal looks at you all day (...)'.  
'Don't call me hostess,' said Soo-Ja, scowling at him. 'I prefer the French term *concierge*, which can refer to either a man or a woman.'  
'I was right the first time then, *agassi*, you're a single girl, which means you can go on a date with me.' (Park 2011, 199)

Mr. Shim continued his advances, but seeing that he could not convince Soo-Ja with mellifluous words, he turned violent and ordered her to pour him some *maegju*<sup>17</sup>. As she did not comply with his request, saying she was not a barmaid, Mr. Shim got even angrier and tried to rape her. Luckily, Soo-Ja was saved by her doctor friend Yul, who was a guest in the hotel.

Another shortcoming of Soo-Ja's occupation as a female receptionist/hotel manager is the fact that she spends very little time with her daughter, whom she loves dearly. In a conversation she has with Hana, her daughter whom Min took to America where his family had moved, Soo-Ja tells her she needs to go back to Korea with her. But apparently Hana had already decided to stay in America with her Dad.

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<sup>14</sup> Hanbok is the traditional Korean outfit, "made up of a short jacket top, fastened together with a large ribbonlike *ot-ga-reom*, and a long wraparound skirt" (Park 2011, 20).

<sup>15</sup> *Aggasi* is the Korean term for young unmarried woman, the English equivalent being Miss.

<sup>16</sup> *Ajumma* is the Korean term for an elderly woman.

<sup>17</sup> *Maegju* is the Korean word for beer.

(26) 'Why do you listen to your father, but not to me?'

'Because he always spends time with me. You're always busy with other things.' (Park 2011, 290)

Soo-Ja would have liked to tell her daughter that she had wanted to be more a mother and less a receptionist, but she didn't want to make Min lose face in front of their daughter, as in most Korean families, women were housewives, while men were responsible for earning the bread.

Soo-Ja's father, who originally opposed his daughter's desire to become a diplomat, on realizing how his daughter suffered because of the mistake she made by marrying Min just to fulfill her dream, is full of remorse. So while people in the countryside encouraged their daughters to study, to have a better life, city people, like Soo-Ja's parents, who came from Daegu, one of the largest cities in Korea, had a more conservative attitude.

As education became a central issue in the lives of young Koreans, an increasing number of boys and girls aspired and did their best to be accepted at prestigious universities. On graduation, many of them hunted for a white-collar job. The growth of the white-collar labor force seems to be one of the most striking characteristics of the economic and social development of 20<sup>th</sup> century Korea. One reason behind this growth is the fact that "white-collar workers traditionally have seen themselves as 'privileged' in comparison with blue-collar workers, and this privilege was often considered sufficient reward in itself" (Kanter 1993, quoted in Park Mathews 2005, 54).

McNally defines the term 'white-collar' as follows:

The term may broadly be used to distinguish all non-manual occupations from manual ones, connoting differences in working conditions, career prospects, methods of payment, and even orientations to work and towards trade unions. More narrowly, the term may be used as shorthand for all lower and intermediate categories of non-manual work, thus making a further distinction between such groups and professional and managerial employees. According to this meaning, the terms 'white collar work' and 'clerical work' are interchangeable. (McNally 1979, 22)

An example of a white-collar female employee is the heroine of Cho's novel *Kim Jiyoung. Born 1982* (2018), whose dream as a college student was to go out to lunch "wearing her company ID on a lanyard (...), walking with a group of people also wearing lanyard IDs, holding their purse and phone in the same hand, chatting about the lunch menu" (Cho 2018, 97). While in her last year at the university, Kim

Jiyoung sent applications, her CV and cover letters to a number of companies, in order to be sure that she had the job of her dreams when she graduated. In her search for a job, she was frequently discriminated against for being a female. But the company that hired her was led by a woman (Kim Eunsil), who was very open-minded and tried to fight for equality of men and women in the workplace. At the beginning of her work in the company, being the youngest, she thought it appropriate to slave for her colleagues, to make coffee for them, to prepare the tables for lunch for them, and to clear the dishes when they were done, until one day when her boss told her she did not have to do all that:

(27) ‘You don’t have to make my coffee from now on (...) or set my silverware when we go out to eat, or clear my plates.’

‘I apologise if I came too strong.’

‘No need to apologise. It’s just not your job, Jiyoung. I’ve noticed this about new employees over the years. The women take on all cumbersome, minor tasks without being asked, while guys never do. Doesn’t matter if they are new of the youngest – they never do anything they’re not told to do. But why do women simply take things upon themselves?’ (Cho 2018, 99)

As a modern woman, Kim Eunsil, the manager of the company Kim Jiyoung worked for, took all kinds of measures to make the workplace a friendlier environment for women, getting rid of unnecessary dinners, where women were supposed to drink alcohol together with their male peers until late at night, and by guaranteeing maternity and paternity leave, an extraordinary feat.

The higher degree of education Korean women enjoyed especially in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century entitled them to penetrate another domain of activity preponderantly dominated by men: the academia. In Mary Lynn Bracht’s novel *White Chrysanthemum* (2018), Emiko’s daughter, YoonHui was supposed to continue the century-old tradition of the women on Jeju island, but even if she performed this activity for a short while as a child, her desire was to go to school and then to further her education at the university. One day, at the age of 10, when she was only a year into her training as a sea diver, while sorting her catch on the shore in the presence of other *haenyeo*, her mother’s friends, YoonHui<sup>18</sup> considered it the best opportunity to inform her mother about her decision:

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<sup>18</sup> Korean given names, which are traditionally made up of two syllables, are rendered in the Romanized transcription in a number of ways: either with a hyphen separating the two syllables (Kyung-Sook), or solid, with each syllable starting with a capital letter (YoonHui), or only the first syllable being capitalized (Jihye). I have preserved the spelling used by the authors/translators, thus the differences.

(28) ‘Mother,’ YoonHui interrupted, demanding Emi’s attention.

‘What, daughter?’

‘I’ve decided ... Well, after very careful consideration, I’ve decided I want to go to school like Big Brother. (...) I want to go to university one day. I want to be a teacher.’ (Bracht 2018, 85)

No matter how much her mother tried to convince her that becoming a *haenyeo* was a family tradition, that this job was in their blood, that it was both their gift and their destiny, YoonHui would not change her mind. She retorts that this may have been so before WWII, but in the early 1970s, new opportunities emerged for girls. On the one hand, her decision was supported by her male teacher, who told YoonHui that she was too smart to waste her talents working like a field hand in the ocean, risking her life in the perils of the sea. On the other hand, in her endeavor to become a teacher, she is encouraged by her own father, who, apparently, had gone behind his wife’s back “and supported his daughter’s break from her family heritage” (Bracht 2018, 87). Eventually, YoonHui does become a **university professor**, who lives close to the famous Ewha Woman’s University in Seoul. As her mother boasts, “YoonHui is a professor of Korean literature at the university, and she is doing well” (Bracht 2018, 58).

Despite her success as university professor, after her mother’s death, YoonHui returns to her small village on Jeju island, to feel again the excitement of being a *haenyeo* in the company of her mother’s former friends. “She won’t dive too deep, just far enough to remember what it is like to be a *haenyeo*, to be like her mother” (Bracht 2018, 288).

## 5. Conclusions

Many of the traditional Korean women’s activities are still performed today, but in a slightly changed/modernized version. Thus, *jungmae* matchmaking is still common, but nowadays this has turned into an industry. In 2012, the largest matchmaking agency was DUO, founded in 1995. It’s

method is to turn matchmaking into a kind of science by asking each new member 150 questions about their character, family, educational and work background (documentary evidence of these must be provided), and the exact characteristics of the person they are seeking before matching the member up with prospective partners by computer. (Tudor 2012, 315)

Shamans and the reasons of the Koreans for *kut* (rites/rituals) have also changed in the past century. While until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were active spiritual leaders, who also had an important influence on the royal families, in time, “the shamans of today do not measure up to their predecessors” (Kendall 2009, xviii). The reason behind this phenomenon is the dilution of the power of mountains brought forth by the industrialization of the country; thus, the gods who used to reside on the mountains descended into more South Koreans, leading to a tremendous proliferation of shamans, of new clients and their modern needs and anxieties (to have a prosperous business, to honor the spirits of a newly bought car, for example).

Though sea diving has been a century old activity of the Korean women, it is still practiced today but on a much smaller scale. Most of the *haenyeo* are elderly women who “wade further into the sea and one by one somersault into the ocean and dive down to Earth’s sea floor in search of treasures that will feed them, send their grandchildren to school, while keeping alive the memory of a favourite diver, a matriarch lost but never forgotten” (Bracht 2018, 288). They continue to live in harmony with the new world and practice this dangerous activity aided by modern equipment.

From among the old women’s occupations in Korea, the one that has completely died out is that of midwives. Already at the end of the 1950s, women would give birth to babies in hospitals, only the poor ones being forced to deliver their children at home. According to Kosis (Korean Statistics), in 2015 no midwives were recorded in any of the administrative districts of the country.

As far as the modern professions are concerned, they have diversified tremendously, so that, nowadays, Korean women are actively engaged in a variety of fields, such as medicine, education, law, the arts, and even politics (let us mention that between 2013 and 2017, the president of South Korea was a woman, Park Geum-hye). In this way, they contribute significantly to the development of the Korean society. Unfortunately, they still experience the contradiction between the Confucian ideology of domesticity and the reality of work in the public sphere, as it emerged from the very recent book authored by Cho Nam-Joo, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*.

The factors that have contributed to these changes in the Korean women’s roles/occupations are rather numerous. First, **access to education** was a key element in the changing occupational roles of Korean women. Christianity, especially Protestantism, first introduced to Korea in 1884, “played a major role in advancing the status of women. Early female missionaries saw the role that education could play in improving the lot of women and took this as their primary

mission” (Yu 1987, 19). Additionally, **institutionalized education** launched by the Japanese colonizers helped young girls escape the confines of their homes, where they were instructed only by their mothers and specifically on matters pertaining to family life. Once they had access to education, their horizon widened, giving them the power to dream big, to emulate the example of their peers in the Western part of the world, especially the American women.

Moreover, the period between 1960 and 1985 was characterized by a rapid transformation of the society from a predominantly agricultural society to a rapidly industrializing nation. The **massive industrialization** of Korea expanded the employment opportunities not only of men, but also of women. As Yu (1987, 23) pointed out, “[t]he proportion of females in the total labor force increased from 29 percent in 1960 to 37 percent in 1980.” Nowadays, according to Kosis, in July 2021, the female labor force participation reached 54% ([https://kosis.kr/eng/statisticsList/statisticsListIndex.do?menuId=M\\_01\\_01&vwcd=MT\\_ETITLE&parmTabId=M\\_01\\_01&statId=1962002&themald=#D\\_2.2](https://kosis.kr/eng/statisticsList/statisticsListIndex.do?menuId=M_01_01&vwcd=MT_ETITLE&parmTabId=M_01_01&statId=1962002&themald=#D_2.2)), women being involved in many of the domains that were traditionally meant for men. The sad thing is that even if they are equal to men in terms of educational levels, women are still discriminated against in terms of promotion possibilities and wages (women’s wages are much lower than those of their male peers who have the same position/job). Moreover, in the workplace, they are constantly exposed to men’s dominant attitude (encouraged by Confucianism), sarcastic remarks (new mothers on maternity leave are called ‘mom-roaches’ because they live off their husbands’ paychecks) and even to sexual harassment or rape. Still, they haven’t given up their desire and fight for gender equality.

This brings us to the last research questions related to gender equality. Despite the fact that Korean women were provided with new opportunities, the cultural norms are not flexible enough (and here I am thinking mainly of Confucianism) to allow women to seize these opportunities. As Tinker opined:

[e]conomic and other social institutional changes may encourage women to work outside the home. But they are not always the major determining factors for women's participation in the labor force. If a certain ideology is considered "sacred" (in Durkheimian terms) and therefore unchanging in nature, certain socio-economic changes requiring ideological change may be perceived to be so threatening that they only induce very conservative religious-cultural reactions allowing few chances for rearrangement. This seems to be the case regarding sex-roles and family issues in Korea. (Tinker 1980, 2)

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