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## From Confucianism to Consumerism: Women, Food and the Media in Contemporary Korea

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the cultural dynamics and contradictions women are experiencing in contemporary Korea. The process of modernization has created structural dilemmas in women's everyday lives. Women nowadays are caught up between traditional Confucian values and western values which is actively incorporated with consumerism in the name of modernity. The tension is clearly revealed in the widely shared values, beliefs and attitudes of food and eating, and the perceptions of women's body images. Although rapid transformation of social and economic environment has greatly modified food customs and eating styles, women's roles and expectations with regard to food and eating are much more ambiguous and problematic than ever before. The symbolic meaning of food in the discourses of television advertisements, as a central site of public cultural representation, is examined. Women's everyday expectations and negotiations with regard to food and eating are further analysed through interviews with women.

### Özet

#### Konfüçyenizm'den Tüketimciliğe:

#### Çağdaş Kore'de Kadınlar, Yiyecek ve Medya

Bu çalışma günümüz Kore'sinde kadın deneyimlerinin kültürel dinamiklerini ve gelişmelerini araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Modernleşme süreci kadınların gündelik yaşamlarında yapısal açmazlar yaratmıştır. Kadınlar bugünlerde etkin bir biçimde modernlik adına tüketimcilikle (consumerism) bütünleştirilen batılı değerler ve geleneksel Konfüçyen değerler arasında sıkışıp kalmışlardır. Gerilim, geniş anlamda yiyecek ve yeme edimine dair paylaşılan değerler, inançlar ve eğilimlerde, ve kadın bedeni imgesinin algılanmasında açıkça ortaya çıkmaktadır. Toplumsal ve ekonomik çevredeki hızlı dönüşümün yemek adetlerini ve yeme stillerini etkisi altına almasına rağmen, kadınların yiyecek ve yeme konusundaki rol ve beklentileri hiç olmadığı kadar muğlaklaşmış ve sorunsal hale gelmiştir. Yiyeceğin sembolik anlamı kamusal kültürel temsilin merkezî bölgesi olaran televizyon reklamlarında incelenmiştir. Kadınların gündelik beklentileri ve yiyecek ve yeme edimi ile olan müzakereleri kadınlarla yapılan görüşmelerle analiz edilmiştir.

## From Confucianism to Consumerism: Women, Food and the Media in Contemporary Korea

<sup>1</sup> Richard Johnson (1994) suggests that cultural identity is continually constructed and re-constructed through the complex interplay between private experiences and the experiences of public culture. According to him, people's everyday lives are not only a source of the public cultural representations but also negotiated by the cultural identity constructed in the public culture. Therefore, he argues, "public versions" of identity and people's multiple "ways of life" make a circuit of identity formation, feeding on each other through "cultural production" and "reading" of cultural products.

### Introduction

Korea has achieved a considerable degree of rapid industrialization and modernization over the last several decades. Women in Korea, however, are experiencing clashes between modernity and tradition, capitalism and Confucianism, and western and Korean cultural values. This unique pattern of cultural dynamics and dilemmas modernity in Korea has presented, is clearly revealed when we look at the relationship between women and their values and attitudes towards food and eating, and the social constraints imposed upon them. Although rapid economic development and social changes have considerably modified people's eating habits, women's values, expectation and practices in regard to food and eating are more ambiguous and problematic than ever before. This structural dilemma, in which contemporary Korean women are caught up, is widely mediated by the logic of consumerism, and this process is clearly revealed in the world of advertising. Korean advertising displays sharp contradictions of these aspects by reflecting and actively reshaping the prevailing images of modern women. Additionally, women negotiate with these public cultural representations consciously and unconsciously through their everyday food practices.<sup>1</sup> This paper attempts to explore the contradiction and tension created in contemporary Korea in the process of modernization by examining women's food habits and their perception of body.

This paper is a part of a wider scope of research dealing with women's changing identity in contemporary Korea. The original research consists of the roles and expectations of women with regard to food and eating both in the public domain and in the domestic domain. However, by focusing on women appearing in public places, and narrowing down the interests to women's own eating habits, this paper will concentrate on examining the tension and social constraints in terms of their diet and slimming habits. Broadly, two types of data were drawn upon in this research; firstly, the discourses of advertisements as a central site of public cultural representation, and secondly, interviews with women on their own daily food habits. Especially, this paper will aim to discover present cultural dynamics by focusing on the ways women accept, reject, and negotiate contemporary currents of change in their everyday food activities, which are revealed through the women's interviews.

### Changing women's identity

Women in contemporary Korea are being confronted with conflicting concepts of female identity. Traditional values suggest that the virtues of womanhood are identified with motherhood, and "true happiness" and "success" in life are firmly located within the family context. As Korean society has maintained a strong tradition of group ethos and family solidarity, the virtue of femininity and motherhood has been largely understood within the collective

context. Women's primary role is, therefore, being a wife and mother, and their place is in the home and with the family. However, there is another powerful set of images, which has newly emerged and constantly present women as independent individuals, free from the bond of family. Increased concern with individualism, the extensive impact of advanced modern technologies, legal and political changes, broadened opportunities in education and employment, and the extensive information systems available over the last decades have combined to influence greatly views of women's roles and expectations, thereby promoting the value of women's individuality, autonomy, choice and self-achievement. The coexistence of long lasting traditional values and the relatively sudden awareness of personal potentialities with regard to women's identity have created a unique cultural dynamic in Korean society. This can be understood through the complex interplay of Confucianism that permeated for centuries as the philosophical and social base, and capitalism as the new mobility of structural transformation in this society.

#### Women in Confucianism

Women's position and changing identities in Korea can be usefully approached through Confucianism, which has been the common cultural heritage of the East Asian region including China, Japan and Korea. The concept of Confucian values refers broadly to "a complex of attitudes and guides to behaviour that spread from China" (Rozman, 1993: 7). Amongst these East Asian countries, Korea has maintained exceptional singularity in terms of ethnicity, national sovereignty, language, and culture, developing a unique historical tradition because the country was isolated from the outside world until the late 19th century.

Changes in Korean women's identity can be traced through the historical stages of social transformation. Firstly, traditional Korean women's identity may be understood in the light of the social base of the *Yi-Dynasty*, which started in 1592 and lasted for several hundred years. During this period, Korea adopted Confucian ethics as a basis

for social life, and the country was strongly influenced by Confucian thought in many ways. Over a long period of evolution these values came to permeate every level of social life, and a range of customs and manners in this region.

The view of men and women in Korea is deeply based on Confucian thought that was widely propagated and accepted throughout the *Yi-Dynasty*. The core ideas of Confucianism are based on a philosophy of harmony and social cohesion, which extols the unity of heaven and humanity. Since the fundamental goal within Confucian thought is the harmonious and stable order of society and the cosmos, there is an emphasis on a hierarchical social structure and authoritarianism. This has created various authority figures including the head of the family and the authority of men over women. The clear hierarchical gender relations have formed a deeply rooted tradition of women's subordination to men in East Asian societies. In Confucian philosophy, the union between man and woman is viewed as the root of all human relations. The harmonious union of men as heaven and women as earth is seen as the foundation of human morality. As heaven (*yang*) dominates earth (*yin*), so the male has precedence over the female (Deucheler, 1992).

Women's identity in Confucian society of the *Yi-Dynasty* was firmly based on their relationship with men, and thus, their life was characterised as revolving around three basic relationships; being an obedient daughter with filial piety to her parents, being a dutiful wife to her husband, and being a wise and caring mother to sons. Accordingly, women's education, traditionally carried out by the elder women of the family within the domestic sphere, was mostly focused on their duties and responsibilities to fit into the family structure rather than to develop their individuality. A woman gained her status by dedicating herself to the husband's family, and more importantly, by bearing a son. As Lee noted, whereas a man's status was "ascribed," the position of women was "achieved" within a Confucian patriarchal family (1992: 418). Women's identity was only solidified through these relationships within the family structure,

and motherhood was considered as the highest value and the greatest virtue in women's lives.

The *Yi-Dynasty* ended with foreign invasion at the beginning of this century. During the colonial domination for several decades by Japan in the early 20th century, the social system that had remained stable over several centuries collapsed, and a new way of life and social system gradually replaced it. The country thus experienced a transitional period. As the extended family structure was maintained, however, the Confucian view of women's roles and expectations within it continued to remain crucial. Under Japanese domination, there was a strong historical imperative for Koreans to resume national independence. While men were actively involved in the national independence movement, there was a strong awareness and encouragement of women's support of the men's roles to resume national autonomy (Cho, 1991). This created a new pattern of gender roles, suggesting men working for the country in the public domain, and women supporting their partners in the private domain. This idea of partnership later led to creating more active images of women and their new roles as society moved on.

Soon after the country experienced liberation from Japanese domination, the Korean War took place in the 1950s and lasted for three years. While Korea began to experience rapid economic growth in the 1960s, the process of modernisation over decades resulted in rapid social transformation. This time of transition witnessed another stage of changing female identity. A western style educational system was widely introduced, and the access of both men and women to public education increased. Naturally, considerable changes appeared in the perception of women's roles, expectations and identities at both public and private levels. While women were still expected to play a central role in maintaining household matters within the extended family structure, women gradually began to be encouraged to discover their own self, individuality and the possibility of diverse social roles. As a consequence, a long-standing slogan in the society, "*Hyunmo Yangcho*

(wise mother, good wife)" became a popular ideology until the 1960s and the 70s.<sup>2</sup> It was assumed that this would be the best for constructing a modernised country, and competing with advanced western countries at national level.

The key features represented in this model can be summarised as the ideal of the nuclear family with equal companionship between men and women, and the increased emphasis of romantic love. The idea of egalitarian marriage partnership, romantic love, and the image of nuclear family became popular, thereby transforming the ideology of "Wise mother, Good wife" into "Successful husband, Beloved Wife."<sup>3</sup> The images of these "modern" Korean women, and a newly emerging fashionable relationship between men and women were increasingly united with the typical western images of femininity and family roles. Ironically, this widely propagated western model of "equal partnership," which was transplanted in a Korean context, yielded an ideology of "cute, lovely and dependent wife" rather than a woman as an independent and confident individual (Cho, 1991). It suggested that women's desire for active roles in an industrial capitalist society could be best expressed both by supporting their husbands in their struggles for success, and by building up women's confidence and competence in constituting home as an emotional haven and protecting their husband and children from the competitive social world.<sup>4</sup>

Superficially, the image of "new women" appeared to have eroded traditional Confucian views of women as it suggests women's more active involvement in the marriage partnership. The traditional Korean patriarchal ideology, that lasted several hundred years and explicitly protected male superiority both in the public domain and in the family, seemed to have been diluted substantially. Yet, it can be argued that the dynamics of western modes of capitalism, which restructured many aspects of Korean society, produced a new form of patriarchy, thereby reinforcing the existing gender relationship.

<sup>2</sup> Smith suggests that this phrase was used for the similar context earlier in Japan during their revolution in the late 19th century (1983).

<sup>3</sup> "Successful Husband, Beloved Wife" was initially created by one of the oldest Korean women's popular monthly magazines, *Yeowon*. *Yeowon* launched a nationwide campaign with this slogan, and this phrase became popular and widely used in Korean society during the time of modernization.

<sup>4</sup> In the newly emerged model of nuclear family, the husband had high educational qualifications and economic activities outside the home, and the wife, who also had relatively high educational qualifications, became a professional home manager, and a capable partner rather than a submissive wife.

### Women in Capitalism

As one of the Asian examples of "late arriving modernity"-the arrival of a consumer system and a consumer culture, Korea, together with other NICS (Newly Industrialising Countries), has become relatively prosperous, and consumption has gathered momentum alongside industrialization over the last two decades or so. A consumer society has emerged, and consumerism has become central to organising and expressing self-achievement and happiness. The process of industrialisation was spurred on by the western modes of capitalism. This, in turn, has contributed to the rapid social transformation, producing new modes of life based on capitalist logic.

It can be argued that advertising plays a key role in the process of modernisation through capitalist growth. The role of advertising can be approached in two ways. Firstly, advertising as an economic institution, which promotes commodities and circulates information for the purpose of profit seeking, plays a significant role in lubricating the rapidly expanding capitalist system. Both public and private spheres are greatly influenced by consumerism during its progress toward modernisation. In the case of Korea, advertising has expanded rapidly, and the country has become the second largest market in both size and profit in Asia, next to Japan, which has contributed greatly to shaping the country's economic structure. Secondly, advertising appears to provide cultural meaning in a consumer society. People in modern times experience problems and uncertainties in their identities because of the uncomfortable coexistence of traditional order and new forms of modernity (Bauman, 1991). Those who experience an "ambiguous and confusing modern self" in transient times, inevitably require modified forms of identity. This ambivalence is often resolved through the "allurement of fascinating consumerism" (Bauman, 1991). Advertising in a consumer society successfully fills this gap by both supplying cultural meaning to consumption and introducing new images of modern life. In Korea, the messages of advertising rapidly began to map out a view of the modern world, and to shape

constantly individuals' way of life. It has been argued that advertising is a key agent of identity formation in the modern world, suggesting what is socially desirable and meaningful, and constructing possible new lifestyles, and magically offering self-transformation and a new identity (Kellner, 1992: 163). The messages of advertising in present day Korea play a significant role in both constructing and reflecting modern identity in the newly emerged consumer society. Over the last several decades, new images of modern identity have appeared in Korean society, fitting into the newly emerged consumerism along with the rapid transformation of economic structure. While the obsessive concern with lifestyle and appearances is widely promoted in the form of public cultural representations, mainly led by advertising, people's pursuit of image construction through consumption-oriented lifestyles has become of prime importance.

For women, construction of modern identity in the world of advertising appears to be highly problematic as the old ideas and values of women's identities, and the new images of women often contradict each other. As we already noted, recent structural changes, ignited by the force of modernity, have transformed the expectations of women in many areas: education, employment, family patterns, lifestyle and many others. Numerous Korean women, whose lives had been confined to the domestic space over several hundred years under the Confucian mores, began to be drawn out to the public space with the increasing awareness of feminist concerns within a short period of modernisation. The accentuation of women's individuality, freedom, and the creativity of an available lifestyle have been strongly linked with finding consumption and leisure-oriented solutions. This has become a dominant cultural representation of women, young and unmarried women, in particular.

Ironically, advertising, for commercial purposes, strategically links feminist concerns such as independence, participation in the work force, freedom of personal choice, power and self-control with

women's physical beauty which has been traditionally valued (Goldman et. al., 1991). Women being depicted in modern advertising are often visible through the detailed lines, curves, gestures and gazes of their bodies. As Goldman and colleagues argue, the process of commodification of women's physical beauty produces two consequences: firstly, women's bodies largely begin to be understood as objects of desire, and secondly, women begin to look at themselves through men's eyes since female beauty has been consistently portrayed and established through the male gaze (Goldman et. al., 1991). Korea, as a rapidly developing capitalist society, is not exceptional in this respect. A new set of women's images have emerged, and created a new style of cultural pattern spurred by consumerism.

It is noteworthy that this process has been largely based on Western cultural values. Contemporary Korean advertising constantly presents and celebrates Western ideals of women's appearance and lifestyles. Commodification of women who appear in the public domain is even more problematic in a non-western society such as in Korea, where both new concepts of female beauty and feminist ideas are super-imposed on deeply rooted traditional systems of thinking and representation. Most of all, the value of feminine beauty has been greatly modified and widely accepted nowadays. For women, the criteria of physical beauty are largely based on the Western concept, transforming the view of preferences of women's physical shape. Additionally, the modern idea of women's individuality and independence contradicts the Confucian view because the basis of Confucian thought is social harmony and order, and that upholds the assumption of a gender hierarchy in which women are subordinate, and women's place is at home.

As we will see, the details of this contradiction are widely discovered both in public cultural representation and people's everyday lives. For a better understanding of the changing cultural patterns, examination of the contemporary fashion of food culture and women's eating habits will be useful. Especially, discourses

discovered in food advertising will provide a clear pattern of this new trend. Additionally, women's daily negotiations surrounding food and eating will show those tensions and contradictions clearly. Before we go on to this task, a brief account of the Korean food system and the promotional culture may be helpful.

## Food Systems and Promotional Culture in Korea

### Transformation of Korean Food and Eating

Korean food, food customs and eating styles have undergone a dramatic transition through the complex interplay between long standing Confucian values and recent capitalist trends. Traditionally, Korean food culture was greatly influenced by the patriarchal form of the extended family structure rooted in Confucian ideas and values (Yoon, 1983). Eating manners, conventions governing the sharing of food and relationships among the family members with regard to food habits, were formed and settled over a long span of historical time, and these are still deeply embedded in the present Korean culture.

Cooking and women have been inseparably tied together within the Korean food tradition. As women have been at the centre of food preparation and management, cooking and food preparation have always played a central role in structuring their lives and daily activities. Women's relationships with parents, husbands and children have been reinforced, and their identity solidified through their food practices. Over the past several decades or so, Korean food culture has seen a remarkable change. Food systems have been industrialized, and manufacturing of traditional food has increased. The catering industry, involving eating out activities, has prospered. As Western eating styles were widely introduced, and fast food became increasingly popular among the younger generation in particular, the generational gaps in tastes, eating habits and food preferences have been widened. Urbanization and the consequent modern lifestyle, economic achievement, transformed family

<sup>5</sup> "Seven Vices", that was traditionally imposed on Korean women, explains the strict view of women's sexuality. It includes sterility, adultery, jealousy and other behavioural guidelines.

structure, and women's increased education and employment also contributed to the transformation of food habits in the modernization process. Nevertheless, women's roles in food preparation basically remain as major domestic activities. In spite of the appearance of modern technology and new food systems, the majority unchangingly prefers traditional homemade food, and this continues to need women's considerable time and labour spent in cooking and food preparation in the domestic sphere. On the other hand, women in public places experience much more dynamic change in their roles and expectations, which has rather become another constraint imposed on themselves with regard to their eating habits. Women's eating patterns have been modified to a great extent. Women today are increasingly concerned about what to eat and how to look physically.

In past generations, women were expected to control their desire for food for the sake of food provision for rest of the family (Yoon, 1974). Eating less and giving more food to the family was considered a woman's virtue. Women's eating manner was differentiated from men's eating, and their own food intake was often discouraged. Women indulging in food always had negative connotations. Women had to learn and build up their female identity by learning their roles and position in the family through the virtue of abstinence in daily food practices. Women's eating was not so much associated with management of their body images. Women's body was basically understood for procreation, and their sexuality was commonly restrained.<sup>5</sup> As women's body image was preferentially based on the childbearing ability, their slim body was rather shunned by the majority of people.

Women's diets today are determined largely by their concern with body images and slimming. This is more distinctive among the women who are seen outside the home, who belong particularly to the younger generation, and who are not yet married. Prevailing views of ideal women's body images have shifted from the preference for a chubby image symbolising affluence and

productivity, to the preference for slimness. A slim figure is now widely seen as a modern mark of women's physical beauty and attraction. Since most women desire to look beautiful, women in general are conscious of their body images. This value has patterned women's eating habits so that their eatings are now more often based on their concern about slimming and calorie intake rather than on health and nutrition. The ways in which women perceive slim beauty, attempt to maintain ideal body images, and feel constant tension will be examined in detail in the latter part of this paper. In general, women's physical beauty and femininity today appear to be greatly affected by western cultural influence as a symbol of modernity. Women's eating habits have also been greatly influenced by the Western style. This pattern is dominant in public cultural representations, and even more obvious in promotional culture that sells consumption-oriented lifestyles. The contradicting images of women are clearly presented in food advertising.

#### Women in Food Advertising

For a closer examination, food advertisements were collected and analysed. Initially, all the food advertisements broadcast for one day on the three Korean commercial TV channels were collected.<sup>6</sup> Then, the food advertisements in which female actors appeared were selected out of all the collected advertisements. Firstly, the data were analysed quantitatively by adopting the method of content analysis. The advertisements were coded based on advertising product, the voice over, the style of setting, and actors' characteristics.<sup>7</sup> Actors were examined by age, gender, activity, space and associated food product.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, qualitative analysis was also carried out in order to discover the structured meanings in the text of the advertisements.

Both analyses reveal that women were portrayed largely in two ways in relation to food and eating: 1) women as food providers for others, and 2) women as food consumers. Firstly, the roles of food provision are greatly valued both for themselves and by the rest of the family. Women's food preparation carries various strong connotations, symbolisation of motherhood, and manifestation of

<sup>6</sup> The sampling period was for three days between the 19th and 21st of October 1998. The date was chosen randomly during the weekdays. "Food advertisement" included all the advertisements promoting food and food-related electric goods. The three commercial channels are SBS, MBC and KBS2. They are nationwide channels, of which key stations are based in Seoul.

<sup>7</sup> The advertised food products were classified into 32 types. These were classified into four larger categories; 1) food, 2) drink, 3) cooking equipment, 4) restaurant and café. Drink was classified again into 1) alcoholic drink and 2) non-alcoholic drink. Food was classified again into 1) sweet or snack, 2) cooking ingredient, 3) convenience food. Advertisements for sweets and snacks were the most frequent out of total sample advertisements.

<sup>8</sup> Actors were categorised into five age groups; 1) Children's group, 2) Teenagers' group, 3) Young adults' group, 4) Mature adults' group and 5) Elderly group. Those who appeared to be aged between 20 and early 30s were classified as young adults' group. Young adults group appearing in food advertisements was the most dominant. Female actors appeared far more frequently than male actors did. The advertised food products were classified into 32 types. Advertisements for sweets and snacks were the most frequent out of the total sample advertisements.

"happiness" for the family. These women generally give priority to other family members' needs over their own, and strongly hold traditional values in regard to food and eating. Secondly, there are other women in food advertising who have entirely the opposite image. While the former hold traditional feminine roles and expectations, the latter are portrayed through modern symbols. The contrast between the former and the latter is most striking. The separation between the two roles of these pairs is sharp and contradictory. The discovery of the images of women on TV can be summarised in terms of binary oppositions:

Public / domestic

on her own / with the family

Single / married

Young / old

Sexuality / motherhood

Modern / traditional

Western / Korean

The left side of the dichotomy, which represents the images of "modern" Korean women, is the problematic part. The women appearing in the public settings are generally typified by one or more of the following markers; generational distinction (young), marital status (single), physical appearance (slim and sexually attractive), and class (affluent). Especially, the importance of women's physical appearance and body image, and their concern about slimness and diet are continually focused on, as these features are crucial in the symbolisation process of modernity. It is also interesting that their activities are mostly based on their leisure, entertainment and consumption rather than work achievement and independence. Unlike women appearing in the domestic space, their food habits are predominantly consumption-oriented in the context of fun, play, excitement, luxury and special occasions, rather than the day-to-day routines of food for nourishment. For them, food choice and eating

are to seek personal pleasure, to satisfy their own desires, to construct a lifestyle, and to assert their individuality. Not surprisingly, it has been found that the majority of Korean food advertisements employ young female actors rather than those of an older generation, and the most frequently promoted food type was sweets and snacks rather than conventional cooking ingredients.

The young generation becomes the most profitable target. For instance, advertisements often show an idealised dream of women's lives revolving around their relationships with men, thereby focusing on romance and sexuality. For this reason, for most young women, eating is portrayed as a pleasure rather than something that engenders guilt and self-control, and cooking is portrayed as a romantic activity rather than a demanding daily labour.

### Women's Everyday Negotiations

It is not surprising that women's reality is far from the world of food advertising. Most Korean women today still hold strongly to traditional expectations and values in their domestic food activities, even though there have been considerable changes in their self-awareness and social expectations. The daily life of the majority of women revolves around traditional domestic roles: food shopping, food preparation, cooking and washing up. For them, food still contains strong emotional value in relation to men and family. However, as the modern images of women portrayed in public cultural representations are so widespread, women find tension and an irreconcilable gap between the fantasy world of advertising and their own everyday world. As we shall see in this part, women experience enormous constraints with regard to their own eating habits due to the newly emerged, and widely shared concern of physical images. Their demanding roles, which are concerned about food for other people rather than for themselves, are still deeply traditional. Yet, they are obsessively concerned about the maintenance of their own figures, which appear to be a consequence



9

Thirty-four women were interviewed for the original research. However, twenty interviewees will be quoted here because of the limited scope of this paper.

10

Several interviews were initially carried out with a cross section of subjects. These first interviewees then helped with the arrangement for the next interviews, and those who had been introduced by the previous interviewees arranged appointments with other women for the following interviews. Most interviews were arranged in this way.

11

Demographic background of each interviewee is described in the appendix.

of modernisation. Women's various eating habits usually converge on desires and attempts to assimilate themselves to the ideal images of women portrayed in advertising, especially with regard to their body images. This trend is prevalent whether they are conscious of it or not. Their perception of physical beauty, their attempt to slim, and their consciousness of men's eyes, as well as other women's, reveal clearly the tensions and conflicts which Korean women experience widely today.

In order to explore women's everyday food habits, values, beliefs and attitudes with regard to food and eating, in-depth interviews with women were carried out. The interviewees were limited to those who lived in Seoul, the capital city of Korea, and to those who ranged in age from their teens to sixties. Interviewees were selected across age, marital status, family structure, employment, income and educational background.<sup>9</sup> The "snowball sampling" method was adopted for expanding the scope of interviewees.<sup>10</sup> The interviews took place in a three months period. Although the interview questions were prepared in advance, the conversations were held relatively freely. Each interview took from 30 minutes to two hours depending on the flow of conversation.

### The Values of Slimness

Unlike the past, women today are familiar with social expectations of having a slim body in contemporary Korea. The values of slimness are widely shared among the women. Most women who were interviewed emphasised the importance of women's physical beauty. Their understanding of physical beauty largely revolves around slimness of the feminine figure.

*I think it (slim figure) is very important, because women should be beautiful, above all. (Interviewee 1)<sup>11</sup>*

*We are not like our mother's generation, are we? I think it is nice to look at charming and slim housewives. Whenever I see slender women, I feel good. (Interviewee 2)*

Whereas women's appearance was focused mostly on the face in the past, the physical shape has become increasingly important in

present day Korea. Since the maintenance of a slim figure is viewed as a social asset, especially for young unmarried women, parents are often as concerned about their daughter's figures as young women themselves. Mothers who want to see their daughter's successful marriage are particularly prone to worry about their daughter's physical shape.

*I'm worried about my eldest daughter, Jin-kyung. Her bottom and thighs are getting more and more broad. I have heard that teenagers nowadays are all like that because they sit all day for studies... Jin-kyung told me that young women before marriage should be as skinny as possible. So I want my daughters to look slim. Actually she looks slim to me, but she says her friends all think her thighs and bottom are too plump. So she is very worried. (Interviewee 3)*

Women desire slimness not only to conform to dominant notions of physical beauty but also as a boost to their psychological confidence and feelings of security in terms of romance and marriage.

*Think about a fat woman. Even to me as a woman, a slim woman looks much nicer than a fat woman does. It is good to look at a slim woman. It must be good for my husband to see me slim, of course. (Interviewee 4)*

*My husband seems to prefer a married woman who maintains her figure exactly the same as before marriage to a woman who is plump. When a man expects a married woman to be slender like that, wouldn't he want a single woman to be slim? I can understand why men like slim women (interviewee 5)*

Even through the eyes of a twelve-year-old son, the body image of his mother as a woman is reflected as crucial.

*Figure? It is very important for women... My son once told me that his classmate's mum has visited his school and she looked very wide and plump. Whenever I hear something like that, I feel I shouldn't become heavy even for my family's sake. (Interviewee 6)*

Wide awareness of the value of women's physical image causes complex emotions such as envy or inferiority, and this triggers actions for a slimming diet.

### Slimming Patterns

As most women are acutely aware of the importance of a slim figure, they tend to mobilise every possible method in order to make an effort to lose weight. Women in general, no matter what age they are, have some experience of attempting to diet. The most common strategy is to restrict food intake by skipping meals.

*I don't have evening meals these days because I am on a diet. I usually have some fruit or a glass of juice at around five or six o'clock in the afternoon. It has been almost four months now... I felt hungry at the beginning but now I am all right. (Interviewee 7)*

Women think that the more they reduce the amount of food intake, the easier their weight loss will be. Accordingly, their attempts to lose weight by abstaining from food often result in an unreasonably demanding attitude toward themselves. Women sometimes start fasting and continue until they cannot cope.

*My friends were talking about the dietary guide in Lady Gyunghyang (a women's monthly magazine), so I bought it. It recommended not to have dinner in the evening, and to have eggs and lots of vegetables instead. So I followed the instruction. I couldn't do it exactly in the same way. The magazine said I could lose ten kilos a month. I think it was false publicity. Anyway, I lost five kilos in August (previous month). (Interviewee 8)*

*I watched a TV programme the other day. Clung Sura, you know, the singer, was on the programme. She was interviewed about how she had lost so much weight. I was actually astonished to see her so changed. She was very chubby before, wasn't she? She said she didn't have dinner, not even a sip of water throughout the evening. I am trying to do that, fasting now. (Interviewee 9)*

While women try to lose weight by reducing the amount of food they take, the whole process of young women's dieting often upsets their mothers. Mothers, whose self perceived role is to care for their children by providing food, feel relieved to see them well fed. Hence, a daughter's diet very often intensifies a mother's anxiety. A mother who has a twenty one year old daughter said:

*She (daughter) said if she ate something late in the evening, it all would turn into fat... she never wants to eat because she is afraid of*

*getting fat. Since she doesn't take enough food, her cheeks are skinny, her chin is pointed, and her face looks pale. It's terrible... That's why she has low blood pressure... I am upset and very worried about this. (Interviewee 10)*

*Our daughters hardly have meals. [Why don't they want dinner?] They say they want a diet. They are afraid of getting fat. They don't listen to me no matter how hard I try to persuade them, so I don't say anything anymore. They must know they are responsible for their health. I shouldn't get upset, should I? (laugh) (Interviewee 11)*

As revealed by many interviewees, dieting is an important part of women's food habits. The motivation behind this self-denying activity reflects the way in which women relate to their husbands, or to men as a whole.

### Through Other's Eyes

As seen above, women are often very conscious of their looks. It is largely because of the belief that physical beauty attracts men, and thus love and marriage are determined by slim figures. Naturally, women's decisions about dieting are often motivated by their husbands'/boyfriends' comments about their wives'/girlfriends' bodies.

*What he (husband) said triggered to make up my mind to start dieting four months ago. My height is short, isn't it? He said one day it would become a bigger problem if I got more and more broad with my short height. There was a crucial moment led to the final decision-making. I was photographed at somebody's wedding in February or March this year. When the photo came out, I couldn't see the clear outline of my face because it was so round. It was a big shock. So I realised "Oh, I need to reduce weight." He said I'd better go on a diet. Since then, I don't take evening meals. (interviewee 12)*

As in this case, women are deeply conscious about what their husbands/partners think and how their husbands see them. Married women frequently put up with critical comments about their body image from their husbands.

*Of course he (husband) talks about me. It was even worse in the past. He used to say "You are really fat, you are a real roly polly...." .. He is not that critical anymore now because I have lost a lot of weight. (interviewee 13)*

12  
"Piggy" is a commonly used joke among children, indicating a plump child in Korean society. It also has a connotation of being cute.

13  
Throughout the Confucian Yi-Dynasty, women were expected not to indulge themselves in food. Those who satiated with food had to carry a negative connotation of food coveting and laziness.

*Of course he does (comments)... (laugh). He says I look terrible, and so on, as a half joke. (interviewee 2)*

*He doesn't say it in front of others. He wouldn't say it outside home. But he often tells me I am too fat. He calls me a piggy.<sup>12</sup> It made me consider this dieting seriously. (interviewee 14)*

Husbands' attitudes toward their wives, and their comparisons with other women often make wives feel depressed or frustrated. Even when wives know that their husbands' comments may not necessarily be serious, they still feel inferior, and even feel insecure and vulnerable.

*He often looks at other women and talks about them when we go out together... (laugh). Well, this woman has a good figure, or that woman has a nice looking bosom, things like that. He gossips like that often... (bitter laugh for a while) (interviewee 15)*

*When a beautifully figured woman passes by, my husband talks about her as if it was a joke. "Wow, the guy who lives with her must be happy." or... he says " It would be nice to have a charming, slim woman rather than to have a piglet." When he watches a beautiful woman on TV, he says he is envious and so on. (interviewee 16)*

Whether this is serious or not, the fact that women's body images are compared with those of other women through men's eyes affects the way women see themselves. As far as women's slimming is concerned, partners are eagerly cooperative, often encouraging their women to start slimming even by suggesting a method.

*My boyfriend recommended me to train by hiking every now and then. He said hiking could help me to lose fat from my tummy. He always encourages me to sweat by walking up hills and mountains (interviewee 17)*

*They (husband and son) encourage me not to eat, because I am overweight. [Don't they worry about you not eating at all while they eat?] They welcome my fasting... so it (fasting) is all right. It's not a problem... (laugh) (interviewee 7)*

*I had regular meals, and tried to have a balanced diet. My husband tells me off by saying that I look after myself too well. I love meat. Because of that, he teases me I am eating too well. (interviewee 14)<sup>13</sup>*

While many women control the quantity of food they eat, women who feed themselves with as much food as they want are not viewed positively by either men or women themselves. Ironically, the above interview reveals clearly that perceptions of women with regard to food consumption has not much changed. Confucian women were encouraged to abstain from food because sparing food in days of poverty was women's role and their virtue. Women today are also encouraged to give up food, not because of women's virtue of self sacrifice that Confucian tradition has cherished for long, but largely because of the fear of obesity and the consequent social punishment the desire for food may result in.

### Women and Biological Changes

Despite the attempts to keep their figures, women are not always successful due to the physical changes in their life cycle. Women's body images go through dramatic changes according to their life cycle much more than men. Most women who were interviewed experienced changes in their figures after pregnancy and childbirth, and this became a threat for them.

*I gained a lot after the birth, almost 8 kilos, I didn't lose much after the birth. So I couldn't find any proper design clothes or proper size for a while. I was very anxious at that time. Even these days, I am worried a lot about my weight, so I am reading a diet guide book at the moment. (interviewee 16)*

*I haven't lost weight after I gave birth. My weight increased too much during my pregnancy. I put on more than 10 kilos, more than average... My mother-in-law often asks me why my tummy is still the same even after the delivery. Then I feel offended. I don't like this kind of comment. Why is somebody else concerned about my tummy? I hate it... (bitter laugh) (Interviewee 18)*

*When I just delivered the baby, my stomach didn't flatten soon after, and my waist was still thick. I was so upset with it... I did post-natal exercise for a while for one or two months (Interviewee 7)*

No matter how hard women try to lose weight, it is not easy for many reasons. To abstain from food by inhibiting one's appetite is often a desperate effort in self-discipline.

*It's hard. I feel like eating all the time. Whenever I feel hungry, I have to put up with it. Can you imagine the feeling that you can't eat when the fridge is filled with plenty of food and fruits? (interviewee 6)*

*It is extremely difficult to exercise regularly. Sometimes I feel like skipping exercise, then I tell myself "Let's forget about exercise today, just this once." When it repeats over and over, I become lazy and undisciplined in the end. (interviewee 19)*

*It's not easy because I am not very disciplined. I keep saying today is exceptional, only today. My decision is too lax... Exercise is useless if I don't control food, isn't it? (interviewee 14)*

Women on the whole, whether they have experienced a slimming diet or not, are hardly ever satisfied with their present body image. When they talk about their physical state, most express a feeling of dissatisfaction with themselves, partly because they often set unrealistic standards that are hard to reach.

*My husband and others say I look okay. He says I just look all right. But when I look at myself, my fat tummy looks horrible, I really hate it. (interviewee 5)*

*I become upset when I look fat. When I can feel fat on my belly, I become angry with myself (interviewee 3)*

*When I look in the mirror while I am dressing, I realise my clothes don't fit, and my face looks like a full moon even in my eyes... (laugh) (interviewee 20)*

Two women who had recently experienced giving birth expressed how they felt to be confronted with their physical changes:

*When I realised that my figure was changing into a typical housewife style after I gave birth, I felt sad. I was grieved because it dawned on me that I was gradually approaching middle age, and getting old. (interviewee 15)*

*I have mixed feelings. Since childbirth, my skin has been chapped, I still have extra flesh around my body, and besides, my waist is just like a trunk... it's a complex feeling. I sometimes feel scared that my husband may think I look like ET, this kind of fear...(laugh) (interviewee 18)*

In the above analysis of interviews with women, we have explored the patterns in which women relate to food in various

ways. From the evidence presented here, women in general, whether married or single, are conscious of their body images. Their concern and anxiety originate from the widely accepted view in modern Korean society that physical images are highly important in evaluating women's beauty, and that physical beauty requires a slim figure. Since body image is closely linked with food intake, admiration of slimness results in various undesirable eating habits. Throughout the interviews, it has been discovered that women are under pressure to control food intake, and thus often tend to neglect meals or abstain from food largely because they are conscious of their need to control weight to maintain a desired body image. The pressure to be slim also affects women's psychological state and commonly generates feelings of guilt, apprehension, inferiority and frustration.

## Conclusion

In this paper, the structural contradiction arising between the clash of traditional and modern values, which contemporary Korean women face, has been discussed in the light of food and eating. Women are expected to take a central role in all the activities of food preparation, and they are the ones who satisfy the food and diet requirements of the family. However, as we have noted over and over through the above interviews, women are mostly located at the periphery of food consumption by avoiding or controlling food.

Traditionally, women's body and sexuality have been understood primarily for procreation through which women's status and power were achieved in Korean society. Accordingly, well-built women rather than slim women were preferred because of their ability to bear children. Women's sexuality was largely restrained, and instead, chastity was strictly imposed. This perception of women's body and sexuality originated from, and was solidified by Confucian thought which had a strong patriarchal base (Lee, 2000).

However, new discourses on women's body and sexuality have begun to appear with very different connotations along with the

industrialisation process and the rapid growth of a consumer culture. As women are increasingly drawn into the public sphere, women's body and sexuality begin to be associated with consumption and leisure rather than work, career and productive life. Their body, therefore, becomes a "vehicle of pleasure" (Featherstone, 1991: 177-8) and their sexuality is constantly commodified. Consumerism actively replaces women's desire for their own individuality with obsessive concern with slim bodies and pleasurable sexuality. Visual images in public cultural representations constantly encourage Korean women to question the way they look, and to take self-responsibility for it.

It is necessary to point out that Confucian thought is still deeply rooted in Korean society even today, where the Western mode of capitalism and the rapid growth of consumer culture have transformed traditional values, beliefs and attitudes. The preferences of women's physical appearance that were solidified through Confucianism for centuries have changed rapidly over the recent decades, as discussed above. Accordingly, women's "productive body" in terms of size and configuration is no longer preferred. Instead, women's sexuality and freedom in the presentation of body are widely accentuated. Nevertheless, it is ironic that Confucian ideology, that keeps its strict view on women's chastity, continues to remain powerful in this society (Shim, 1998), thereby constantly reinforcing contradictory views on women's identity. Advertising, as a representative public cultural agent in this fast growing consumer society, reveals the fragmentary and irreconcilable images of women. Advertising embraces the virtues of traditional Korean femininity and motherhood on the one hand, and celebrates women's search for individuality and freedom on the other hand, constantly upholding conflicting images with regard to food and eating.

It can be argued that this may be a result of the "rush-to-industrialisation" process (Han, 1995). Consumerism emerged worldwide as an "aggressive" form of capitalist survival instead of a smooth progression (Ewen, 1976: 54). It is true in the Korean context.

Korea has experienced rapid social, cultural and political changes in the course of development. The cultural gap created between resilient traditional values and the social modification over recent decades has been successfully filled by the intervention of consumerism.

It is noteworthy that a consumption-oriented lifestyle has become a powerful cultural ideology. The pursuit of a modern lifestyle through consumption is largely oriented by Western images. Commonly, non-western industrialising countries, which dream of an abundance of material culture, amplify the ideal images of the West (O'Barr, 1994). In Korea, as well as a number of other newly industrialising countries in Asia, the abundance of material culture, which once was only dreamed of, is now no longer the exclusive property of the West. Instead, admiration and idealisation of productive power, success and domination, which once belonged to the west, have been now largely replaced by associations with the good life, consumption and leisure, through which freedom is to be achieved. For Korean women, increased concern for a healthy diet, slimming, stylisation of female body, romance and sexuality is all charged with strong connotations of "westernised" forms of modernity.

Weiming and the colleagues have observed that it is "the most worrying/bothering thing" for women to remain constrained in the hierarchical Confucian structure, trying to answer the question of what it means to be an individual woman in the family (Weiming et al., 1992: 120). It is doubly difficult because the deeply rooted traditional value system and the new modes of life constantly overlap and clash in Korean society. Advertising may continue to lead women to feel vulnerable and insecure by both affecting the way in which they look at themselves, and generating confusion and anxiety. Constant provision of Western images in advertising may continue to lead Korean women to a consumption-oriented, superficial solution. Even though women may not necessarily identify themselves with those in the world of advertising, the

paradoxical dynamics of the interplay between Confucian tradition and capitalist development may continue to remain powerful in this society.

The complexity of the inter-relationship between public representations of female identity and individual self-identity at the private level makes cultural investigation difficult. A detailed examination of the ways in which women interpret and interact with the representations in advertising may provide additional insights into the changing dynamism of modernity. Although it was beyond the scope of the present research, this key area for future research would provide a fuller understanding of the formation of gender identity in the process of modern development in Korea, more broadly in East Asia, where capitalist expansion and consumer culture are growing rapidly.

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*Appendix: List of interviewees*

- Interviewee 1: In her late 20s. Single. Living with parents. College student.
- Interviewee 2: In her late 20s. Married for 2 years and 6 months. Living with husband and a 4 months old son. Worked as a journalist for 6 years until marriage. Currently not employed.
- Interviewee 3: In her early 40s. Married for 20 years. Living with husband and three daughters aged 19, 17, and 13 year old. Not employed.
- Interviewee 4: In her early 20s. Single. Living with parents and a brother. Working as radio broadcaster for two years.
- Interviewee 5: In her early 40s. Living with husband and mother-in-law. No child. Employed as clerical worker.
- Interviewee 6: In her early 30s. Married for 13 years. Living with husband and two sons aged 12, and 3 years old. Employed for 8 years as insurance saleswoman.
- Interviewee 7: In her late 20s. Married for 3 years. Living with parents-in-law, husband and a 1 year and 6 months old baby son. Unemployed.
- Interviewee 8: In her early 30s. Married for 5 years. Living with husband and a 4 year old son. Employed part-time as cleaner.
- Interviewee 9: Early 20s. Single. Living alone. Factory worker
- Interviewee 10: In her late 50s. Divorced for 23 years. Living with a 21 year old daughter. Having an independent son in his 20s. Employed for 31 years as cook.
- Interviewee 11: In her late 40s. Married for 27 years. Living with husband, two sons and a daughter. One independent daughter. Occasionally employed as manual worker.
- Interviewee 12: In her late 20s. Married for 2 years. Living with husband with no child. Not employed.
- Interviewee 13: In her late 20s. Married for 6 years. Living with husband and a 4 year old son. Employed as factory worker.
- Interviewee 14: In her early 40s. Married for 19 years. Living with husband and a 20 year old son. Self-employed for 2 years and 5 months as shop owner.
- Interviewee 15: In her late 20s. Married for 4 years. Living with husband and a 3 year old son. Part-time language teacher.
- Interviewee 16: Early 30s. Married for 5 years. Living with husband and a 4 year old daughter. Shopkeeper.
- Interviewee 17: In her mid 30s. Single. Living with younger brother. Employed for 8 years as librarian.
- Interviewee 18: In her early 30s. Married for 1 year and 3 month. Living with parents, husband and a 5 month old baby. Worked for 8 years as broadcaster. Currently not employed.
- Interviewee 19: In her late 30s. Married for 11 years. Living with parents, husband, 10 year old son. Employed for 10 years. University lecturer.
- Interviewee 20: In her late 20s. Married for 5 years. Living with husband and a 7 month old baby. Employed as clerical worker.

## Modernleşme ve Mahremiyet

### Özet

Mahremiyet, toplumsal ve bireysel yaşamın temel yanlarından biridir. Mahremiyet, güncel tartışma konuları arasında önemli bir yer tutmaktadır. Bu tartışmalar çerçevesinde sık sık kişilerin sağlık, mali ve sabıka durumlarına ilişkin kayıtların mahremiyetinden ve kişisel verilerin güvenliğinden söz edilmektedir. Özellikle medyanın özel yaşam alanına yönelik müdahalelerinden yakınılmaktadır. Bilgi ve iletişim teknolojilerindeki hızlı gelişmeler, özel yaşam alanına yönelik ihlalleri son derece kolaylaştırmaktadır. Hükümetlerin ve özel kuruluşların eriştiği gözetleme olanakları giderek artmaktadır. Kişilerin özel yaşam alanlarının büyük ölçüde daraltılan bu gelişmeler, özel yaşam alanı da dahil olmak üzere kişilik haklarını tartışmayı zorunlu kılmaktadır. Bu makalede ilkin, sosyoloji, kültürel antropoloji ve psikoloji literatüründen hareketle, mahremiyet kavramı irdelenmektedir. İkinci olarak, mahremiyet olgusunun tarihsel gelişimi, kamusal alan-özel alan ayrımı çerçevesinde incelenmektedir.

### Modernization and Privacy

#### Abstract

Privacy is one of the most essential aspects of social and individual life. Privacy occupies an important place among current issues under subjects of discussion. Individuals worry about the safety of their personal information and especially complain about the invasion of privacy by the mass media. The advancement of information and communication technologies makes invasion of privacy extremely easy. Governmental organizations and private establishments have large surveillance capabilities. Under current conditions, individuals have utmost desire for privacy, yet they have little means to control the dissemination of information about their health, financial conditions and other personal data such as criminal record. In this article, the concept of privacy is examined first by means of sociological, psychological and cultural anthropological literature. Secondly, the relationship between modernization and privacy is discussed in terms of differences in private and public domain.

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