

Book Review

Practicing Feminism in South Korea: The Women's Movement against Sexual Violence

Jung Kyungja. London: Routledge, 2014. 147 pages

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The *Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) Women in Asia Series* produced a number of excellent contributions to the literature on women in Asia in recent years. This latest contribution by Dr. Kyungja Jung, Senior Lecturer at the University of Technology, Sydney, is no exception.

Using the *Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center (KSVRC)*, a sexual assault center, as a case study, Jung lays out the development women's movement against sexual violence in the newly established democracy of South Korea. As a former member of the Center herself, the author is able to draw on a wide array of materials and sources. Jung later returned as a researcher for an extended period of participant observation and in-depth interviews with activists in KSVRC and other women's organizations. The author focuses on the perspectives of the activists and their feminist practices, providing an insider account not only into the dynamic development of this organization but also the changing relationship between the government and civic movements in the 1990s and 2000s. Jung places the discussion in the framework of feminist practice among activists.

This book begins with a brief outline of the main themes of the book and the author's connection to the feminist movement. Chapter 1 explores the emergence of the Korean anti-sexual violence movement. Until the mid-1980s, the Korean women's movement as part of the *Minjung* (people's) movement had prioritized the fight for democracy against the authoritarian regimes of Park Chung-hee (1961-1979) and Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1987). The use of sexual violence by government forces against women in the pro-democracy movement was described as a means of government oppression. Sexual violence in other contexts,

however, remained a taboo topic in Korean society that could only be addressed after democratization had been achieved. The author describes in detail how the need for an anti-sexual violence movement was galvanized by several high-profile cases in the late 1980s, when women had turned on their attackers after a long period of abuse.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the development of the KSVRC. Jung credits the growth of Women's Studies programs at Korean universities, led by Ehwa Womans University, with the spread of feminist thinking and the development of the anti-sexual violence movement in the late 1980s. By 1991, a number of lecturers and graduates of women's studies programs came together to found the Center.

Chapter 3 investigates the role of the KSVRC in creating awareness of sexual violence, including the introduction of a new term for 'sexual violence' to the Korean vocabulary. The Center's organization was based on feminist principles with a collective structure and little hierarchy. One of the main tasks of the Center was the counselling service that not only aimed to help women but also empower them. The Center also engaged in advocacy work, aiming to bring more attention to the problem of sexual violence.

Chapter 4 examines such activities and their roots in feminist values. The focus is on the changes in the legal provisions and the KSVRC's pivotal role in drafting and building support for the 'Act on the Punishment of Sexual Violence Crime and Protection of Victims'. As a consequence of the Act, police procedures were changed and new services for victims were introduced. Jung uses the KSCVR's role in bringing sexual harassment cases to court as illustrations of KSCVR's legal advocacy work.

Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the institutionalization and professionalization of the KSVRC during the progressive governments of Presidents Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008). Funding for civic organizations was expanded during this period, including reimbursement for counselling services and providing grants for other projects, but this changed the feminist practice of the organization. Organizational structures and hierarchies had to be developed and government agencies aimed to influence working procedures. As the KSVRC shifted to become a service-orientated institution the loss of feminist identity was keenly felt by activists. As a result, the members

decided in the mid-2000s to reduce the reliance on government funding. Instead, they refocused on feminist concerns and expanded these beyond their initial heterosexual activism. The return to advocacy and feminist practices highlights the dynamic nature of the KSCVR and its key members.

The conclusion sums up the achievements of the women's movement against sexual violence, most laudably the proliferation of sexual assault centers across the country (165 in 2011). The author then expands on the challenges in a changed political climate after the election of conservative President Lee Myung-bak (2009-2013). Since 2008, the funding for civic groups was cut dramatically, leaving many groups struggling for survival. As women's organizations found themselves once again in opposition, they refocused on their work on changes to the patriarchal structure of society. Despite the decline in women's studies programs and feminist activism on the whole, the author concludes with a positive outlook on the future of the feminist movement in South Korea.

This concise book offers new insights into the development of South Korea's diverse women's advocacy groups following democratization, as well as bringing women's issues to the public agenda. This includes the promotion of a number of important legislative changes which challenged the patriarchal nature of Korean society. Beyond the relevance for the study of Korean feminist practice, the book is a useful addition to the literature on feminist movements in Asia, and provides a sound basis for any author wishing to undertake comparative work. The focus on a feminist group should not deter a scholar of social movements and civil society, as the book also offers insights into the effects of government funding on the organization and *modus operandi* of such groups.

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