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Veiling of Korean Women: The Neo-Confucian Influence in Comparison to the Veiling of Muslim Women

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of veiling of women in Muslim culture also occurred in pre-modern Korea. *Sseugae*, a type of veil, was worn by noble women in Korea during the Yi Dynasty to conceal their faces. In a society, strictly ruled by the Confucian philosophy and ideals, women's outdoor activities were extremely restricted. Noble ladies travelled by human-carried palanquin, colorfully draped and protected from viewing by strangers, wearing veils of different types denoting their noble statuses. In this paper I will present who among the Korean women were expected to wear what types of veils in which circumstances, how deeply the Confucianism permeated and dictated the value system and social morals of the early Korean society, further influencing the highly stratified Korean societal structure in which women in various stations were expected to behave according to their fathers' or husbands' statuses and to dress accordingly including their headdresses. The significance of this paper will be in examining how the cultural aspects of women having had to wear veils in a paternalistic, patriarchal and hierarchical society, dictated by pervasive Confucius ideological and moral standards still exist and influence the modern-day Korean society. My conclusion will show the similarities in the socio-cultural customs of dressing and veiling/unveiling of Korean women in comparison to those of the Muslim women within the cultural, political, and religious contexts in spite of their elevated status, education, and involvement in political activities in the modern-day world.

Keywords: Veiling of women, Neo-Confucianism, Korean women, Muslim women, Korean Yang-ban society, Patriarchal society, Women's fashion.

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1.0 Introduction

Sseugae, a type of veil, was worn by noble women in Korea during the Yi Dynasty to conceal their faces when they went outside in public, which was extremely rare to begin with. In a society, strictly ruled by the Confucian philosophy and ideals, women's outdoor activities were extremely restricted. Noble ladies traveled by human-carried palanquin, colorfully draped and protected from viewing by strangers, wearing veils of different types denoting their noble statuses.

While much research and literature have been dedicated to the veiling or unveiling of women in the Muslim world, led by Leila Ahmed, Asma Barlas, and Isobel Coleman, no research can be readily found on the cases of veiling of Korean women in the pre-modern history of Korea. The scarcity of such research has led the author to research the subject and present the findings in this paper. In this paper I will present *who* among the Korean women were expected to wear *what* types of veils in *which* circumstances, and how deeply the Confucianism permeated and dictated the value system and social morals of the early Korean society. Also presented will be how the highly stratified Korean societal structure dictated women in various stations to behave according to their fathers' or husbands' statuses and to dress accordingly including their headdresses. The significance of this paper will be in examining the cultural aspects of women having had to wear veils in a paternalistic, patriarchal and hierarchical society with pervasive Confucius ideological and moral standards. The historical transformation of the practice of unveiling the women in Korea, as her traditional society evolved into modernity—painfully and forcibly—largely under external pressures and influences, will also be examined.

My conclusion will show the significance in the customs of dressing and veiling in Korea in comparison to those of the Muslim women in different countries of the region within the cultural, political, and religious contexts. In the end, it was women, the *subalterns*, who were the main objects of restrictions in both worlds, after all—veiled or unveiled.

2.0 Brief history of pre-modern Korea

Archeological evidences have been discovered to indicate that the Korean peninsula was inhabited by Paleolithic men who were hunters as early as 30,000 to 40,000 years ago. Specimens of “charred wood from the sixth level of the Paleolithic layer” and other remains were found in a southern province near the Kum River (錦江) in an excavation of the 1960s, led by a historian Pow-key Sohn of Yonsei University. The radiocarbon dating of these evidences placed them to be 30,690 years old. More abundantly Neolithic remains and artifacts were found in other parts of the country to lead historians to estimate the beginning of the early history of Korean people somewhere between 3,000 and 2,000 B.C. (Han, 1970).

I along with many other Korean children grew up learning about a mythical, celestial figure, Hwanung (환웅), who was believed to have descended from heaven to Korea with his three thousand followers, and metamorphosed into a human and produced a son, called Tan-gun. According to records of the Emperor Yao's reign in China, this Tan-gun Wang-gun (檀君王建) built a walled city of what is now called Pyongyang, the current capital of North Korea, and ruled for many years starting in 2,333 B.C., approximately the time when the Great Pyramid in Egypt was built. Therefore, we learned that the Korean history goes back to about 4,300 years. (Breen, 2004).

The Ancient Chosun (古朝鮮) stretched into southern Manchuria from central north Korea approximately in 220 B.C., forming Koguryo, which later became one of the Three Kingdoms, along with Paekche and Silla, in the fourth century A.D. when the latter united the Three Kingdoms into Unified

Silla (統一新羅). After almost 500 years of prosperity and flourishing of arts and architecture with Buddhist influence, Silla gave way to Koryo Dynasty in 936 A.D. Buddhism was revered as the national religion of Koryo Dynasty, initially enjoying continuous flourishing in the arts and literature but later plagued by intrigues surrounding Buddhist monks and their corrupt followers in the royal court.

When Yi Song-gye (posthumously titled T'aejo, meaning Grand Progenitor) seized power from the corrupted court of Koryo Dynasty, he declared himself the founder of the new Yi Dynasty in 1392 and took aggressive measures to eliminate the old royal family and the Buddhists, establishing a new bureaucratic aristocracy and socio-political structure in place. Yi Dynasty prospered for nearly five hundred years until it gave way to the Japanese colonial ambition, finally succumbing as its protectorate in 1910 for thirty-six years.

3.0 Confucian influence on Korean society

Historians have traced the first transmission of Confucianism from China to Korea as early as in 372 A.D. during the *Three Kingdom* period when a Confucian academy was founded in Koguryō, the northern kingdom, followed by the opening of others in the southern kingdoms of Paekche and Silla in 682 A.D. During the Unified Silla Dynasty, a long period of cultural flourishing yielded many artistic legacies of Korean people, such as construction of Buddhist temples and pagodas, which are still celebrated and certified as the UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the new Millennium.

Confucianism contributed to the scholarly advancement of knowledge and culture in the Korean society through the Koryō Dynasty, as its founder, Wang Kōn (877-943), adopted it as “the ideology of a centrally organized state.” Government-sponsored as well as many private schools were established based on the Confucian ideology to educate the upper-class students and aspiring government officials. Its influence reached further into the Chosun Dynasty when Neo-Confucianism was introduced by scholars such as Yi Che-hyōn and his disciple, Yi Saek, who studied overseas in China and revived the Confucian Academy in the early to mid-14th century. It was this Neo-Confucianism that greatly influenced the Korean society with its pragmatic teachings with widely-used study materials: the *Classic of Filial Piety* and *Four Books*. (Deuchler, 1992).

Although the Confucianization of Korean society was basically an upper-class phenomenon, its ideology of three cardinal human relationships (*Samgang*) and five moral imperatives (*Oryun*) had a far-reaching and comprehensive influence into the very fabric of Korean society at every level. *Samgang* (三綱) dictated the hierarchical relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, and husband and wife, while *Oryun* (五倫) reinforced the interpersonal virtues:

Righteousness (üi) between sovereign and subject, proper rapport (ch'in) between father and son, separation of functions (pyöl) between husband and wife, proper order of birth (sö) between elder and younger brothers, and faithfulness (sin) between friends. (Deuchler, 1992, p.110).

Given the subject matter of this paper, I will focus on how the Neo-Confucianism affected the lives of women in the highly hierarchical, patriarchal, and paternalistic society in which they were educated only to be responsible for the management of family rituals, such as wedding, ancestor worship and mourning, without any legal rights for inheritance or property ownership.

Asma Barlas posed two questions regarding the teachings of Qur'ān on the issue of women in Islam: 1) “[D]oes Islam’s Scripture, the Qur’ān, teach or condone sexual inequality or oppression?” and 2) “Does the Qur’ān permit and encourage liberation for women?” If these questions were asked about the teachings of Confucius and their interpretations by Koreans in the old Korean high society, what would the answers have been? (Barlas, 2009, p.1).

Unfortunately, as it happened in Islam culture where Muhamad’s original teachings became misinterpreted or distorted into something terribly different, the same seemed to have happened with

the original teachings of Confucius as they were deeply entrenched in the Korean society as repressive, discriminating, and patriarchal doctrines against women. My examination of *The Analects of Confucius* failed to find any evidence of Confucius' own teaching of such an extreme sexist doctrine. Historians such as Deuchler argue that the Yuan's Neo-Confucianism was later disseminated to Korea and adopted as an ideology for sociopolitical renovation which "infected" the Korean society in "a comprehensive and compelling way to social problems." (Deuchler, 1992, p.26).

3.01 Education of women

As Deuchler stated, the Confucianism of Korean society was naturally "an upper-class phenomenon" due to the "sheer weight of its canonical literature makes Neo-Confucianism an elitist enterprise." The upper-class educated their male children by the use of private tutor scholars in private academies at home, called *su-dang* (書堂), with girls included only as rare exceptions in relatively progressive families. During the second half of the eleventh century such private schools mushroomed alongside the government-sponsored school system throughout the country.

Girls past the age of seven were forbidden to sit in the same room or associate in any direct way with boys and were confined in the inner sanctum of the family house. In general the sole purpose of educating the girls was to instill in them "the ideals of a male-oriented society and to motivate them for the tasks of married life" so that they can carry out the duties and responsibilities as wives and mothers. Deuchler pointed out the contradicting image of a woman in Confucian society where she was expected to be "modest and submissive" as well as "strong and responsible" to be considered virtuous. (Deuchler, 1992, p. 259).

Only when the Great King Se-jong (世宗大王) assembled a group of scholars in Jiphyun-jeon academy to create an easy-to-learn 24-character alphabet system as the basis of Korea's own written language in 1442, were women and commoners able to teach themselves and learn to read and write. This truly was the most important achievement of any Korean kings in that it emancipated the unprivileged common people of Korea by opening their minds to the wisdom of the world. (Han, 1970, p.208).

3.02 Political class society (*Yangban Society*)

The traditional society of pre-modern day Korea, more specifically of Chosun during the Yi dynasty was built on a rigid, caste-like structure, determined at birth. There were four hierarchical classes: 1) *yangban* [兩班], a scholarly upper class from a clear, distinguished "line of descent" of ancestry; 2) *chung-in* [中人], 'middle people' class; 3) *sang-in* [常人] or commoner class, also known as *yangmin* [良民] (good people) who were farmers, fishermen, merchants and craftsmen; and lastly 4) *chonmin* [賤民], meaning 'low-born' or 'inferior people' who worked in grave-digging, tanning and butchery. Shamans, exorcists, entertainers and the female *kisaeng* [妓生], the Korean equivalent of the Japanese geisha girls, were classed in the same status as slaves until, in 1650, when government slavery was technically abolished. Although some of these *kisaeng* became concubines of rich *yangban*, their lowly status from birth did not change. Only after the girls were married, their births were recorded in the husbands' family trees. (Breen, 1999, p.87).

Learning was only allowed and afforded by people born into the upper *yangban* class and, extremely rarely, by *chung-in*. It should be noted that the commoners carried "the burden of taxation" and military service, although they did not belong to the ruling upper class, without any privileges. And the most visible distinguishing factors determining commoners from *yangban* class were in the way they dressed and lived "by their simpler mode of life." (Deuchler, 1992, p13).

4.0 Traditional costume of Korean women

Korean women's traditional costume, called *Hanbok* (韓服), considered "one of the world's most conservative" by Mary Ellen Snodgrass in her encyclopedic book, *World Clothing and Fashion*. It

reflected a Confucian ideal of modesty in such a way that “no unauthorized eyes could catch a glimpse of” female figure, wrote Deuchler. Kyung Ja Lee echoed this observation in her book, *Traditional Korean Costume*, but also pointed out how the costume “conceals and reveals” the female form, as seen in old calligraphy paintings of Shin Yun-bok (1758-c.1820) who painted women in short blouses, revealing the waistband of her voluminous skirt, while others were covered with a cloak-shaped veil (Figure 1). This type of dressing was deemed “wicked but coquettish” by Confucian scholars. (Deuchler, 1992, p261; Lee, Hong, & Chang, 2003, p.12).

Upper-class women wore layers of multi-colored tiered underskirts, exemplifying modesty yet with elegance. Neo-Confucians of the early Chosun society tried to reform women’s fashions to get rid of any “corrupt” ways, carried over from the previous Koryō dynasty. Social differences could be easily identified by dress styles and bright colors worn by upper-class women who were clad in silks, whereas lower-class women could only wear white or gray dresses made with plain fabric woven from hemp, or cotton in later years. The bright red color was worn exclusively by privileged *yangban* women or female entertainers (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Cloack-shaped veil



Figure 2: Noble women

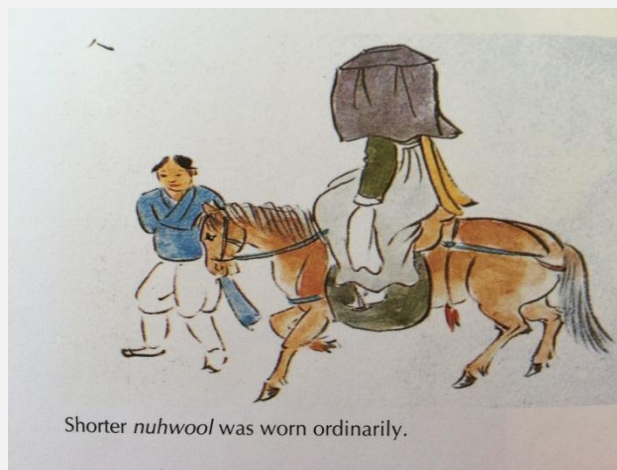


4.01 Types of veils worn by women

Korean headdresses worn by men and women, in general, served a dual purpose—to “protect and decorate the head, while indicating the wearer’s rank and the formality of ceremonial occasions,” wrote Kyung Ja Lee. According to the shape and use, *geon* (巾) covered the head, *ip* (笠) had a brim, *mo* (帽) was a practical hat, and *gwan* (冠) indicated the wearer’s rank. Lee also attributed the Korean custom of wearing headgears to the Neo-Confucian philosophy of the Chosun society as “noblemen” wore them to signify their ranks and positions, whereas “commoners” simply to protect their heads from the weather and for other practical purposes. Since “noblewomen” were usually not permitted or supposed to have any outdoor activities, few headgears were developed for them, except for the head coverings for the rare occasions of their outings or as ceremonial crowns. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the headdresses worn by women. (Lee, Hong & Chang, 2003, pp.18-19).

4.02 Headdress for the upper-class women

There were several different types of veils, *Sseugae*, worn by Korean upper-class women: *Nuhwool*, a black sheer silk framed veil to cover from head to waist (Figure 3), *Jangot*, a head and face-covering in the shape of overcoat, usually made of green pure silk with purple collar and chest straps to be tied at the chin (Figure 4), and *Sseugae chima* or shorter *Jangot*, worn by the lower-ranking upper-class women (Figure 5). (Yang, 1997, p.112).

Figure 3: Painting by Hye-won Shin Yun-bok**Figure 4:** Jangot**Figure 5:** Sseugae chima

Lower-class common women were not subjected, or allowed, to wear any headdresses except for the purpose of protection from weather, hot or cold, in which case they wore a simple square piece of cloth, called *cheoneui*, folded in half diagonally and tied in the back of the head. It was common that they did not wear anything to cover their heads or faces when they went out on their own or accompanying a noble woman as seen in Figure 1 above.

5.0 Modernization of Korea

The modernization of Korea and its society came in a painful way. In the late nineteenth century the royal court in Chosun (Yi) Dynasty was plagued with factions between powerful families and struggles over succession as King *Choljong* died in 1864 without an heir and his Dowager Queen appointed a twelve-year old boy from her own Andong Kim clan. As the boy (later called *Gojong*) ascended to the throne, his father called himself Regent *Taewon'gun* (Prince of the Great Court) and became the most powerful person in the country. He was known as a “great sage...uncompromising, honest, and dedicated” to create a society that “represented all the virtues of the Confucian tradition.” (Han, 1970, p.362).

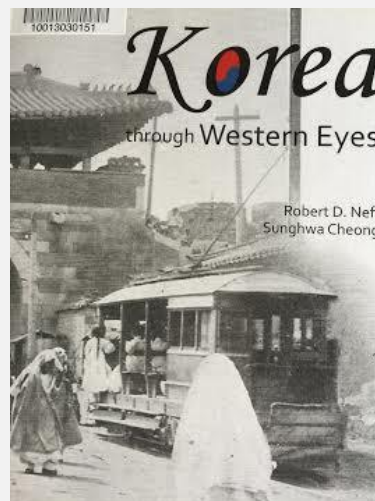
Having seen China get inundated by Western encroachment to threaten its sovereignty, Regent *Taewon'gun* adopted an extremely anti-foreign policy of isolation to control the spread of Christianity, which he believed was subversive to Confucian ideals, and to stop the inflow of evil Western goods, such as Opium. In the meantime, Japan, having opened its doors early on and westernized since Meiji Reform period, aligned itself as the leader in trade, technology, and military powers in Asia. Korea was caught between Japan with its keen interests to have a free hand in exploiting Korea and China with its desire to continue to claim its suzerainty and play the role of Korea's *Big Brother*. Emperor *Gojong* (高宗), despite the isolationism of his father, Regent *Taewon'gun*, saw the need to modernize his country and sent a fact-finding mission to inspect the modernization of Japan. Upon their return and as U.S. Commodore Robert W. Shufeldt landed his ship in Chemulpo (present day Incheon), Emperor *Gojong* agreed to the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between the United States and Korean governments in 1882—the first occasion when these two countries as independent nations came together. Emperor *Gojong* sent a special envoy of seven men aboard U.S.S. *Monocacy* to San Francisco on September 3, 1883, signifying the historical event of opening the doors and dispatching the “first ever reported” Koreans who stepped onto the U.S. soil. (United States Department of State Papers, 1883).

Once the door was opened, a flood of Western ideals and materialistic influences, most of which were positive with some exceptions, landed as well. The young Emperor *Gojong* and his Queen *Min* started a modernization social reform, adopting Western-style education and military training, etc. Christian

missionaries helped found four secondary schools, two for boys and two for girls by 1890. The first girls' school opened in 1885 and was granted its name "Ewha (梨花)," meaning pear blossoms, by Emperor Gojong, followed by the opening of Ewha Woman's University in 1886.

Along with these positive Western influences came other social and cultural changes, however, largely enforced by the Japanese colonization efforts which aimed to desecrate Korea's own culture and language. Koreans were forbidden to speak in their own language in public or at home, and were forced to adopt Japanese names, including their family names, as well as shed their own cultural customs of dressing. Western-style or Japanese-style industrialized clothing was promoted, soon to displace the Korean women's dress of *jeogori* (blouse) and *chima* (skirt). Veils disappeared as well, although they lingered awhile as were worn by women who were out on the streets increasingly and seen by foreigners in early 1900s. (Figure 6). Judging from the photo credit title, "The West Gate in Seoul," I believe these women were the female students who were enrolled in the Ewha Academy, located in the West Gate area, in their commute to and from the campus. (Photo credit: The West Gate in Seoul, in Neff & Cheong, 2009, p. 216).

Figure 6: West Gate in Seoul, ca. 1901



Aside from the veils which had long signified the paternalistic Confucian ideals of womanizing customs of Korea, the Korean female wardrobe was admired with national pride for their own beauty and style among the Koreans, as well as by foreigners, for centuries. Unfortunately, the Korean way of dressing with or without the veils was pushed aside by the forces of Westernization and Japanese colonization in the mid-1900s, only to be worn now at ceremonial occasions such as first birthday celebrations, weddings, special banquets, or funerals. (Snodgrass, 2014, p.350).

6.0 Conclusion: Veiling or unveiling in Islam and Korean cultures

The act of veiling a woman is closely linked to the oppressive nature of the society and culture while unveiling signifies the shedding of the "portable seclusion" and symbol of resistance in public space as well as the education for women, as written by prominent scholars on Islam, such as Leila Ahmed, Isobel Coleman, Albert Hourani, and others. (Ahmed, 2011, p.19).

Just as Muhammad's message of equality between men and women is clearly expressed in the Qur'an, the Confucius' teaching of "separation of functions (pyöl) between husband and wife" on the relationship of *Samgang Oryun* says nothing of the inequality between them. Just as the Islam religion has been distorted and used by extremists to enforce inequality of women, the Neo-Confucian ideals were transmitted to and used by the pre-modern Korean society to inhibit women as unequal members of the society. Although Korean women stopped wearing veils in the early to mid-1900s, the lingering

effects of female submission and inequality are prevalent in today's Korean society. (Deuchler, 1999, p.110).

The South Korean Constitution, established on July 17, 1948, clearly highlighted women's rights to employment and education in order to prohibit discrimination, as stated in Article 9, Paragraph 1 of the 1948 Constitution:

All citizens shall be equal before the law and there shall be no discrimination in political, economic, social, or cultural life on account of sex, religion or social status. (Kim, 1972, p.297)

Nevertheless, the ratio of women representatives in the South Korean National Assembly remained extremely low, averaging 2.9 percent between 1948 and 2004. It increased to 5.9 percent in the 16th National Assembly of 2000 and then to 13 percent in the 17th National Assembly of 2004, illustrating the increasing status and political empowerment of women in the new Millennium, according to a 2014 article in *Journal of International Affairs*.

As for the education of women, the number of women enrolled in higher education was 262,500, accounting for 28 percent of the total enrollment in 1987. Based on the dataset from the Korean Longitudinal Survey of Women and Families (KLSWF), conducted by the Korea Women's Development Institute, between 58% and 61.2% of Korean women with upper secondary or higher education were employed in 2009, showing a relatively lower rate of "labor market participation by educated women" than in other OECD countries. (Cho & Cho, 2015).

While this is seen as a puzzling phenomenon by the authors of the above report, I argue that it should be seen as a lingering remnant of the socio-cultural legacy of Chosun Dynasty, still influenced by the Neo-Confucian idealism, where upper-class women are choosing to stay home and provide care and educational direction to their children rather than joining the labor market. What I would like to point out, in conclusion, is the fact that more women *are* being educated in secondary and higher education than ever in the Korean history and *are* involved in the politics, exemplified by President Park Keun-Hye, the current and the first female President of Korea. A similar trend in the Muslim world, as a larger number of women achieve higher education, social and political status into leadership positions, signifies women's empowerment and defies the labeling of women as "subalterns" who may now choose to veil or unveil themselves.

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