

Changes to the Korean Family in the Colonial Period: A Study focusing on Divorce Cases in the 1920s

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(In lieu of an abstract) In the field of Korean family studies, the colonial period feels hidden, as if dragged below the surface by the sheer weight of its historical significance. The family was first studied in institutional and historical terms in the West under the influence of Darwin's nineteenth century theory of evolution. Later, it received attention from fields such as law, medicine, and psychology. The 1920s saw the introduction of statistical methodologies and study of the family became established within the academic system as family sociology. Family studies in Korea show a developmental trajectory almost the same as this, but which begins with historical and legal research. Historical studies include Kim Duheon's *Study of the Family Institution in Joseon* (1948), which offers a detailed account of the historical development of changes to the family institution since the Three Kingdoms period. Judicio-historical research includes Jeong Gwanghyeon's *Study of Korean Family Law* (1967) and Park Byeongho's *An Examination of the History of Korean Legislation* (1974), which address processes of historical change in phenomena such as marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance.

1. Introduction: Family Studies and the Colonial Period

In the field of Korean family studies, the colonial period¹ feels hidden, as if

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¹ (Translator's note) Korea was a colony of Japan from 1910 to 1945.

dragged below the surface by the sheer weight of its historical significance. The family was first studied in institutional and historical terms in the West under the influence of Darwin's nineteenth century theory of evolution. Later, it received attention from fields such as law, medicine, and psychology. The 1920s saw the introduction of statistical methodologies and study of the family became established within the academic system as family sociology. Family studies in Korea show a developmental trajectory almost the same as this, but which begins with historical and legal research. Historical studies include Kim Duheon's *Study of the Family Institution in Joseon* (1948), which offers a detailed account of the historical development of changes to the family institution since the Three Kingdoms period. Judicio-historical research includes Jeong Gwanghyeon's *Study of Korean Family Law* (1967) and Park Byeongho's *An Examination of the History of Korean Legislation* (1974), which address processes of historical change in phenomena such as marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance.

Since the 1970s, in addition to history and law, anthropology and sociology have made many contributions to family studies. However, most existing studies that trace transformations of the Korean family under titles such as "historical changes to the family" or simply "changes to the family" go no further than examining the issue up to the Joseon period, while those that do extend to the present explain family change in terms of two broad axes: traditional society until the Joseon period and modern society after national liberation. For example, in *A Study of the Korean Family Institution* (1983), Choe Jaeseok focuses on families in Silla and Goryeo and analysis of family relations in Joseon, while Yi Gwanggyu's *A Historical Study of the Korean Family* (1977) concentrates on analyzing family structures in the Three Kingdoms period. In *Changes in the Korean Family Institution* (1997), meanwhile, Han Namje takes an approach based on the premise that changes to the functions of the traditional family structure began with the rapid industrialization and urbanization that took place after liberation.

While this academic tendency to emphasize family structure and functional aspects continued, a number of new perspectives emerged from the 1980s, including relationships between family members (Park Bujin 1981), psychological anthropological approaches regarding families and the social status system (Kim Juhui 1989), analysis of families and relations from a feminist viewpoint (Yun Hyeongsuk 1990), analysis of the relationship between family change and gender roles (Mun Okpyo 1992),

and study of the ideology that constructs the family (Kim Eunhui 1995). In terms of methodology, too, these studies adhere more faithfully to qualitative research than previous work. But such new perspectives and methodologies have not established themselves as a major trend in family studies, while family studies itself remains eclipsed within the field of social science by other topics.

In the West, however, methods of studying family history distinct from those of Korea became established as a trend from the late 1960s: Although the research of institutional, functional, and structural aspects had long dominated the history of family studies, there were gradual attempts in historical research to link the subject to social history. In 1960, Philippe Ariès's *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (Centuries of Childhood. A Social History of Family Life) was published. In Part 3 of this work, Ariès analyzes the family and investigates its reality, while positioning it within the larger framework of historical change. Views of the family after Ariès's study show a clear change of direction toward new perspectives on issues such as the intersections between the family and society, and the ways in which the emotional states of family members relate to changes in the family itself. In the 1970s, meanwhile, the study of aspects such as family institutions, terminology, and the forms and functions of the family disappeared from anthropological research as the center of gravity shifted markedly toward topics like gender, power, and difference. Interest in and analysis of issues such as contradiction, paradox, and ambiguity continue today.²

The study of everyday life is now an active field in Korea, with women and families as key research topics. The results of such work have yet to accumulate, however; the tendency is to understand individual lives in the context of political and social change, while research that seeks to understand them as dynamically and mutually interacting with the structures of their times can still be regarded as in its initial stages. In today's Korea, with its symptoms of crisis including the "collapse" and "disintegration" of the family, there is a particularly strong need for family studies to move beyond statistically-based classification of family types and function-centered analysis based on the roles of family members. This study begins with an awareness that the family must be studied from a historical perspective and in terms of the relationships between the

² For information on detailed studies, see Peletz (1995: 345-346).

experiences, conflicts, and strategic choices of individual family members and the family structure as a whole. In this sense, the family in the colonial period remains insufficiently explored territory; this study aims to initiate a forum for abundant discussion of the family once again among the many major topics of the twenty-first century.

The general conception of the colonial period is of a time of coercive rule by the Japanese military, interspersed with episodes of resistance by Korean independence armies. In the socio-cultural realm “Korean traditions” were wiped out by the indiscriminate introduction of modernist thought by way of Japan, intellectuals endured deep torment, and individuals lived lives of helplessness. When we enter the dimension of the everyday, however, the individuals who lived in this period were speaking, thinking deeply, and making choices in the midst of conflict. From the 1920s onward, in particular, many voiced concerns about the “destruction of the family” due to divorce rates as high as those we see today, while the “family terrain” of the time became severely undermined.³ But the many divorces destroying the family were not private incidents taking place at an individual level but integral manifestations of the contradictions of the time in terms of male-female relationships; they are meaningful as historical incidents, intimately related to changes in the topography of the family in an age of mixed tradition and modernity. In *Le Désordre des familles. Lettres de cachet des Archives de la Bastille au XVIII^e siècle* (Family Disorder: Lettres de cachet from the Archives of the Bastille in the 18th Century; 1982) Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault offer an early demonstration of the deep fissures that beset families toward the end of the Ancien Régime through their analysis of *lettres de cachet* ordering the imprisonment of family members in the Bastille due to marital disputes or father-son conflicts (Ninomiya 1986: 34-35). This study begins by focusing on the year 1920, when concerns about the “collapse of the family” gradually began to increase, examining the circumstances of the era and the discourse regarding divorce as reported by magazines and newspapers at the time, and collecting and analyzing reports of divorce lawsuits and incidents. I

³ Beginning in the 1920s onwards, various magazines published discussions and commentaries about divorce, while the society section of the *Dong-A Ilbo* was full of the term *divorce surge* and articles with titles such as “The ‘Epidemic’ of Family Destruction” (June 26, 1922, p. 3 row 4) and “Devastated Village Families, Buying and Selling Wives, Divorce by Mutual Agreement at the Drop of a Hat” (March 17, 1928: 5 row 3), were common until the late 1930s.

then go on to show the points of difference between discourse and reality regarding family life at the time. The study also seeks to emphasize that changes in the family landscape in the colonial period due to divorce were more a part of a transition to a “modern family,” containing complex layers of alternating tradition and modernity, than a rupture from the feudalist family order.

2. The Introduction of New Ideas and the Collision and Parallel Existence of Values

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time of rapid change in Korea in response to changing international currents, while a powerful flood of new ideas swept in after the country opened its ports to the outside world. Amid these changes, it appears that deciding which ways of life and which values to discard and which to keep, from among the old and well-known and the new and unfamiliar, was not a question of individuality and personal preference but one with a direct bearing on survival. Officially, the so-called “modernizing” Gabo Reforms of 1894 brought the abolition of the traditional *yangban*-commoner caste system, a ban on human trafficking and permission for widows to remarry. With the advent of the 1900s, questions emerged as important points and core issues of contention regarding whether “the family as the basic unit of society” and “marriage as the starting point of the family” lowered Joseon society to the level of “unenlightened barbarians” or sent it on a path of “civilization and enlightenment.”⁴

At first, however, there were no vehement calls for free marriage based

⁴ In an article titled “Editorial: The harmful consequences of premature marriage” in Issue 4 of *Family Magazine* (September 1906), Ju Sigyeong cites loss of physical energy and impedance of study as harmful consequences of early marriage, writing, “Good family unions make a good country, while bad family unions make a bad country. Therefore, the governance of a country must start with the family, and the governance of a family begins with marriage. Marriage lies at the root of all human affairs, and is the connection that leads to various other things.” He also says, “In well-governed countries in the old days, women got married when they were 20 and men when they were 30. Now, when you look around the world, the more civilized a country, the more its people wait until their spirit is full and strong, the man and the woman have studied enough, and they have prepared for married life and for educating children before they get married...” (Ju 1906: 4-5).

on romantic relationships between couples for the sake of the “civilization of marriage.” The initial priority was to solve inter-generational conflict. In “The clash between old and new ideas in our family” Park Seungecheol (1917: 7) claims that “in rapidly changing times like today” “old-fashioned men” must avoid family conflict and keep the peace by following the ideas of “new men,” emphasizing as follows:

Ideas changed greatly from year *gabo* [1894], when new civilization and new thought were finally brought into our country. The clash of two opposing thought systems ... can be found, broadly speaking, at a social level and, narrowly speaking, at family level. ... Old fashioned men are passive, while new men are active. Our fathers and elders tell us that we receive our entire bodies from our parents and that we must therefore not cut our hair, that we must wear horsehair headbands in the style of the kings of old, and that we must wrap our putties high up our legs, kneel down at our desks, and study the Four Books and the Three Classics, the splendid culture and institutions of the Three Sovereigns, Five Emperors, and Three Dynasties, the flourishing virtue of Confucius, and the Four Sages and past kings and become reliable elders. But we take an opposing view: we will cut our hair and wear Western clothing and read and recite the biographies of Washington, Jesus, and Muhammad, the masterpieces of Shakespeare and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. ... We often say our fathers and elders ... are behind the times, while they say we are unhappy, steeped in the vulgarity of our times and lacking awareness. A clash of ideas occurs, and with such different ideas how can we ever reach agreement? It’s hard to have peace in the family when the opinions in it are different. ... Therefore, our parents and elders must first understand the times. (1917: 39-40)

Park also claimed that “Just as the autocracy of China collapsed in the face of the world’s republican ideas, so should the autocracy of the family be smashed to pieces to achieve equality” (1917: 41). Such assertions came together with ideas of free love, free marriage, and free divorce that entered Korea with the Japanese colonial authorities’ change to a “cultural policy” after the March 1 Independence Movement of 1919. Discourses of family equality, free love, free marriage, free divorce, and women’s liberation from the old-fashioned family institution mixed and continued to spread. For example, the Buddhist nun Iryeop (Kim Wonju) began publishing *Sinyeoja* (New Woman) in March 1920. In her “New Generation New Woman’s Proclamation,” she declared that women were human beings, too; in the same year, Changhae Geosa explained in the magazine *Genesis* that the family institution changed according to the age, while sharply criticizing family institutions that ignored the character of women for suppressing

individual rights and impeding national development (1920: 23-28). In 1921, a text by Swedish educational scholar Ellen Key advocating free love, free marriage, and free divorce received a rapturous response upon its translation into Korean.

The wholesale emergence of family and women's issues as targets for reform in the early 1920s brought calls from many people and in various publications for abolition of concubinage and polygamy, increased educational opportunities for women, cultivation of the capacity for autonomy, and the equal application of notions of virtue to men and women:

Polygamy and concubinage are the result of weak compassion for women. They constitute abuse of power by men; as long as concubinage remains, the status of women cannot be raised. ... We talk about 20 million fellow Koreans, but when you take away the 10 million women locked away in women's quarters, that leaves only 10 million. If we are to liberate women from their four thousand years of imprisonment, we must abolish the convention of keeping men and women apart, allow women to re-marry, do away with the discriminatory application of notions of virtue to women, ban the buying and selling of daughters, and ban prostitution. We must cultivate women's ability to live independently if they are forced to do so, and give them educational opportunities in order to minimize the wasting of their abilities. (Yi 1921: 3-7; adaptation to contemporary Korean by author)

By the mid-1920s, the various ideas associated with women's liberation became influenced by socialist thought and began to incorporate greater emphasis on women's economic independence and the need for female employment. More people began claiming that women's status would be raised and happy marriage would become possible when women had jobs and could be economically independent.⁵ In "Women's employment and its significance" (1925), for example, Bae Seongnyong expresses the desire that many women follow a professional path, calling work an indispensable stage on the way to becoming an adult and asserting the value of women's employment, writing, "Women's spirit of independence! Working to guarantee their own livelihoods through their own strength! What a beautiful action; what an honorable life!" In "Women's liberation and

⁵ By the 1930s, it was being argued that economic independence for women also offered a solution to the problem of rising divorce rates. Yang Tansil's "Women's Forum: A Study of the Problem of Divorce" (1936: 56-59) offers a good illustration of this perspective.

economic freedom” (1926), too, Yu Gakyeong writes, “When women cut their hair short and wear makeup, and when men and women receive equal education and go for walks together, that’s neither liberation nor freedom. Only when [women] take proper jobs, only when they are sure to apply themselves to working life in order to become independent and self-supporting, will they achieve economic liberation and equal respect.”

However, in terms of role within the family, the private realm in which the woman was the object of a man for love or marriage, or in the context of the ego for-itself, even while we find that the discourse on women within common opinion calls for family equality, the liberation of women as human beings, and free marriage based on free love, women are once again discussed as beings for inclusion in families where the husband is master, and as beings responsible for housework and child raising – in other words, as passive, homely beings in contrast to the active, social nature of men. In the same text in which he calls for the overthrow of old customs and liberation of women in all families, Yi Deokbong writes, “Since a country cannot have two monarchs and a family cannot have two masters, let’s cede the position of master of the family to men. Men should be in charge socially because of their superior economic power, while it is right for women to be in charge of the family because of their productive characteristics” (Yi 1921: 6). He also emphasizes that many great men since ancient times have had the backing of excellent mothers. Meanwhile, in “What is marriage for a woman? The three main reasons I am getting married – A bold confession to you” (1925), Yi Seonghwan reveals the content of a letter sent to him by a woman:

Mr. Ri!⁶ By the time this letter reaches your hands, I will have become another man’s wife. My [family] home is busy and full of the clothes I will take with me. The reasons I am getting married are, firstly, that the physiological changes that came to my body once I reached 20 years old have made me long to get married. Secondly, he has the vigorous spirit of a young man ... how could I turn down his love and passion? Thirdly, they say when I get married it will be hard to make ends meet ... but even if my married life unexpectedly ends in misery, I will have no regrets.

⁶ (Translator’s note) Many (though not all) words and names now spelled with initial vowels or the letter Y in South Korea were spelled with an initial R in the early twentieth century. The surname Yi, often formerly spelt “Ri” or “Rhee,” is a common example (albeit a confusing one, since it is also commonly anglicized as “Lee” by convention in the South).

After publishing her letter, Yi offers strong praise for the woman's attitude, offering the advice that "Korean women take this path without knowing what it means to get married or to be a wife, but this letter [writer] at least shows a knowledge of the physical changes that come to a young woman's body and of what it means to have a husband, and far-sighted common sense about the world. Therefore Korean women, who are now living in a transition period, should abandon vanity and pleasure-seeking and lead proper married lives." At first glance, it would be possible to interpret the letter writer's marriage as that of a modern woman with new values, based on the facts that she was not getting married prematurely, that she was accepting her husband's passion and love for her as a basis for marriage, and that she used the phrase "decided to get married," implying that the decision was her own. But within the interpretative context of the article writer, Yi Seonghwan, the contents of the letter come to signify a woman who understands her true duty and is trying to find her place in her family-in-law. In other words, while the official discourse emphasizes independence and autonomy for women, there is not much difference from the idealized domestic, submissive woman of the previous era in the context of marriage and family.

Emphasis on the equal family and on the liberation of women as human beings continues into the late 1920s, but we still find double standard-based, contradictory views that continue to stress women's role as wives, along with the notion that they should not be economically active. In *Samcheolli* (1929), for example, O Changgyu writes as follows:

I am a 27-year-old man. I graduated from "B" Commercial School and worked at a bank, but then lost my job. When I grew sick, my wife took a job at Jingogae Store. My wife is extremely pretty. She earns 25 won a month – quite a high salary. But it's been a couple of months now, and there must be department store owners and male shop attendants where she works... I've been imagining them taking my wife to teahouses and touching her hand. I want to warn other men in my situation: Don't send your wife out if at all possible, as it's psychologically very painful. (quoted in Kim 1999: 237)

At this time, then, the discourse that all humans must be liberated from the feudal order, marry based on free love, and form equal families, was dominant, accompanied by a profusion of new opinions, brought by modernity, that women were human beings and should be educated and able to state their thoughts. But when women were regarded as individuals,

rather than part of an abstract group, and placed in the weaker position of objects of male love or marriage, we discover a return to feudalism. A clear illustration of this dissonant male desire for women can be found in “A woman you can feel safe about dating” in the magazine *Sinyeoseong* (New Woman) (3(4): 23):⁷

1. A woman who speaks well but keeps secrets. 2. A woman who looks serious on the outside but is light on the inside. 3. A woman who is naïve but possesses intelligence. 4. A woman who is easy to date but has a firm sense of virtue. 5. A woman who clearly says “no” when necessary. 6. A woman who is gentle but holds firm convictions. 7. A woman who speaks frankly when she knows it is proper to do so. 8. A woman who is refined but [illegible] on the inside. 9. A woman who is learned but not arrogant. 10. A woman who is polite and understanding. 11. A woman who keeps herself well-groomed but is not vain. 12. A woman with experience of the world but who is not sly.

At first glance, it appears that the introduction of new ideas has produced a collision with old ideas, and that the feudal order is ultimately moving slowly aside and making way for a new era. But it can be observed that the modernity experienced by families and women in the 1920s was one where ideas and values clashed and mixed, mixed and excluded, and excluded and engaged, producing intersecting, multi-layered discourses that cannot simply be explained as the collapse of the traditional family and emergence of the modern family, or as the fall of the old-style woman and the rise of the era of the new.

3. Divorce Suits and the “Surge” in Divorce: Expressions of Value Conflict

1. The Emergence and Development of Arguments for and Against Divorce in the 1920s

Divorce or divorce suits can be defined as a clash of mixed, contradictory values in a changing society, manifesting itself through the lives of a man and woman married and living together. In the 1920s, divorce was a

⁷ This text is not attributed to any author; it appears to have been written by the magazine’s editorial team, or an individual on the team.

controversial issue discussed in print as much as free love and free marriage. Published in 1921, the inaugural issue of *Seogwang* (Dawn) magazine was a special issue on marriage and divorce. An introduction titled “On the current marriage and divorce problems of Koreans” read as follows:

To young Korean men and women today, agitated by old ideas and newly arrived trends, marriage can almost be called a problem of life and death. ... Currently, the idea of free love is accepting the urges of foreign trends such as free marriage, free divorce, and even the destruction of the family institution and the abolition of the system of marriage. On the other hand, the arrival of today’s situation, where we are faced with the difficult collision between old and new due to factors such as early marriage, forced marriage, and irrational, meaningless marital relationships, is accompanied by growing depravity in the form of divorce and concubinage. (Pyeonjipbu 1921: 43)

Some 13 well-known figures then discuss questions such as “What kind of man or wife do you want?,” “Are men and women in Korea today for or against divorce?,” and “In what circumstances should you divorce?” Published at a time when most magazines were about five pages long, this special issue runs to some 20 pages. Among the 13 contributing figures are some familiar to us even today, such as Na Hyeseok, her husband Kim Uyeong, Iryeop Kim Wonju, and Kim Dongin. They express a variety of views on divorce, ranging from praise to reservation, compromise or absolute opposition.

Jang Yongjin, for example, takes the stance that a marriage, once established, cannot be altered without a valid reason, despite the harmful effects of premature marriage, because rash divorce is “a crime against human duty” (Pyeonjipbu 1921: 47):

The proper thing in terms of duty is for them to sacrifice themselves and work hard to provide an ideal family, peace, and happiness for future children. Even uneducated wives should at least supplement their knowledge with some temporary education in order to try and become as close as possible to the ideal partner. (Pyeonjipbu 1921: 48)

Hong Byeongseon, too, asserts that divorce should not be possible except in cases when either party has committed a serious crime, or when the woman has abandoned the man, or run away from home, saying, “Even if a wife was forced onto a man by his parents, trying to abandon her after several years of living together or, even worse, when they have children, is a

sin worse than taking a concubine” (Pyeonjipbu 1921: 56).

In direct contrast to this, however, others come out in praise of divorce, claiming it to be a proper and reasonable course of action if the marriage was based on love that has now disappeared, and arguing that it is also a way of reforming the family. Hwang Seogu, for example, strongly advocates divorce for loveless couples, writing:

The first step toward reforming Korean society must be reform of the family. There is no love or peace in a Korean family. Once the moment of sexual intercourse has passed, what's left but a series of daily arguments where they snarl at each other like dogs or monkeys? ... This is why Koreans today feel no kind of attachment to society. Therefore, divorce among loveless couples will bring the end of our loveless society. That's why I want to be a vehement advocate for divorce, when it comes to today's Korea at least. ... The misery of a child caught between loveless parents must be several times stronger than the pain felt after its parents have separated. (Pyeonjipbu 1921: 50-51)

Yu Jinhui, too, expresses strong support for divorce, saying:

Once you understand that the saying, “A woman of virtue never marries a second time” is an evil teaching of male tyranny that shackles women like slaves, calling for virtue or chastity is greatly humiliating to women. The reason so much importance is attached to female virtue, unlike male virtue, is that women have been possessions. Where is the merit in the excessively restrictive institution of monogamy? ... Terrible events associated with rape and sex are all self-destructive effects of the system itself; if you can see through such irrationality, there's no reason not to go ahead unhesitatingly with divorce. (Pyeonjipbu 1921: 54-55)

Such discussions of the pros and cons of divorce continue through the 1920s and into the next decade. By the mid-1920s, one writer commented, “Newspapers and magazines go on about divorce and marriage so much that there's nothing whatsoever novel about it any more.”⁸ By the 1930s, the discussion had moved beyond the advantages and drawbacks of divorce and some articles were published giving specific information about the legal regulation and administration of divorce, or the attitude of a new woman marrying a divorced man.⁹

⁸ C.Y., Mr. (1926). “Commentary.” 『신여성』 [New woman] 4(5): 12-16.

⁹ Yang, Y. (1931). “Divorce and the law today.” 『삼천리』 [Three thousand ri] 3(11): 104-105; Seok Geumseong et al. (1931). “The attitude of a new woman to adding her

2. Discourse, Statistics, Reality – and the Women and Men Living between Them

The 1920s is described as an era in which the collapse of the old order brought the expansion of free love, free marriage, and free divorce, and conflict between new and old-fashioned women deepened as married male intellectuals returned from study overseas, became baptized in the new culture, and began relationships with new women. Such descriptions generally define family crises of the time as the adverse consequences of early marriage, failure of new women too far ahead of the times to settle into family life, or the abandonment by their husbands of old-fashioned women who were behind the times. Divorce has therefore been regarded as something experienced only by certain types of persons. But a look at the people involved in reports of divorce cases and other incidents in the 1920s shows that they were not just male and female intellectuals educated the new way and that it was not always old-fashioned women for whom divorce ended in tragedy.

Reports in the *Dong-A Ilbo* mentioning divorce and divorce suits in the 1920s show that divorce was referred to dismissively as “infectious” or “a thoughtless epidemic.” According to the *Monthly Survey Report* (조사월보), published by the colonial government, the divorce rates were 3.8 percent in 1922 and 3.4 percent in 1923, but jumped to 4.5 percent in 1924, continuing to go over 4 percent until 1929 (Yi 1981: 11). This increase in divorce suits and divorces since 1924 appears to correlate with changes in civil law in the 1920s. In their Ordinance on Civil Matters in Korea, promulgated in 1912, the Japanese colonial authorities borrowed most regulations regarding civil affairs from Japanese civil law. The section on family law, however, stipulates in Article 11 that “Matters regarding relatives and inheritance shall follow the conventions of Korea,” thus applying Korean common law. From July 1, 1923, (year 12 of Japan’s Taisho era), however, Japanese civil law was applied to Korea. From then on, divorce applications from both women and men were legally recognized, along with divorce by mutual consent: at last, divorce applications from women were also permitted.

At this time, the increase in divorce was viewed as a symptom of

name to the family register of a divorced man when marrying him.” 『삼천리』 [Three thousand ri] 3(11): 45-47. Samcheollisa 삼천리사.

conflict between men educated in the new style and old-fashioned women. As a result, media reports often exaggerated the tragedy faced by old-fashioned women, or told emotional stories of their efforts to avoid divorce. Examples are found in articles with titles such as “300 wives abandoned as a result of their husbands’ divorce disease appeal in tears to Association for Women’s Education for new education” (December 21, 1922: 7 row 7), “Woman kicked out by new-style husband wanders around day and night, sadly looking for place to go” (September 11, 1925: 2 row 5), and “Park Geumdong, who traveled penniless to Seoul when faced with divorce and is studying painstakingly.” Among these, the story of Park Geumdong also features her photograph and occupies a considerable amount of page space, clearly showing the newspaper’s intention to enlighten readers as to the need to educate old-fashioned women:

Park Geumdong (17), currently studying in the third grade at Geunhwa School in Anguk-dong, Seoul, comes from an old-fashioned family in Hapcheon, Gyeongsangnam-do. She had a sheltered childhood and knew nothing about the world beyond the front gate of her home. At the age of 15, she married Gang Gyuhyeong (19), a relative and student at Dongnae High School, on the orders of her parents. Soon after she was married, her husband proclaimed to her, “I can’t spend my life with you if you don’t study and learn the latest knowledge, so if you’re scared of getting divorced, study.” Despite being a young bride, she knew that what he said was right, so ... (despite the opposition of her in-laws and her own family) ... she has now found a room at 85 Gwanghun-dong, and is living independently while attending the third grade of Geunhwa School. Kim Mirisa, the school principal, says that the student can barely afford the tuition fees, so things are very difficult for her, but she studies hard and is well-behaved. ... Park also says that she will only return home when she has studied consistently and succeeded, no matter what hardships she has to endure, but that when she thinks of everything that’s happened so far, there have been many truly painful times.

But when reports relating to actual divorces in the 1920s are collected, the approximately 130 articles published in the society section of the *Dong-A Ilbo* show that most divorce suits and divorces were due to mistakes by the husband. Even among these, the vast majority (80) were not because of concubinage or bigamy, but due to bad behavior by the husband resulting in divorce suits from the wife’s side; examples included imprisonment due to criminal activity, drinking, opium addiction, disappearance, groundless abuse, battery resulting from morbid jealousy, or

battery of the wife's parents. By contrast, divorce suits or divorces due to concubinage or bigamy on behalf of the husband accounted for only a very small proportion of cases (approximately 10), while those resulting from mistakes by the wife, such as running away, violence, or disrespecting her parents-in-law, came to fewer than 10. Suits due to infidelity by wives appear continuously from the beginning to the end of the 1920s, but these are markedly fewer (16 cases) than bad behavior, battery or abuse by husbands.

Bad behavior, wife abuse, and disappearance by husbands are continuously and evenly distributed throughout the 1920s as the main reason for divorce suits and divorces, accounting for a high proportion of cases. Starting in 1924, however – from the mid-1920s, in other words – we start to see certain phenomena that differ clearly from those of the early 1920s. These include a marked increase in the number of divorce suits involving elderly couples,¹⁰ plots to achieve divorce, skepticism regarding loveless marriage, and divorce suits due to physical flaws and problems of taste. Until the early 1920s, divorce involved running away due to abuse by husbands or, in more active cases, committing arson to escape marriage. However, from the mid-1920s, we find men and women becoming more enthusiastic. Tamer examples included forging seal stamps to fraudulently sign divorce papers, while more extreme cases included a man having his own wife raped by his friend:

Jeong Geunmo (28), the ... [illegible] of a famous Pyeongyang rich man Jeong Gwando, and Ok Gyosik (21) have been married for nine years. Geunmo recently happened to meet a woman called Yi Maehwa from Gampal-ri, Hancheon-myeon, Pyeongyang-gun and wanted to live with her. But he didn't have a sufficient reason to divorce his wife, Gyosik. While agonizing about what to do, he suddenly filed for divorce around June this year, saying that his friend Jang Jeongju had committed adultery with Gyosik. When questioned by prosecutors, Gyosik suddenly said of her

¹⁰ August 18, 1921: 3 row 8. "Why divorce at age 80?"; August 6, 1925: 2 row 6. "The lunacy of a senile old man, old man with three sons and two daughters is tricked by his concubine into kicking his wife out; sues wife for wrongdoing"; September 2, 1925: 2 row 9. "Old man in his 70s gets divorced"; January 1, 1926: 2 row 6. "Woman in 70s sues husband for divorcing her"; March 7, 1927: 2 row 8. "Couple in 70s apply for divorce at township office"; September 7, 1927: 2 row 8. "Old couple files for divorce after some 50 years together"; September 9, 1927: 2 row 8. "Old man denies taking concubine; old woman proves it"; October 22, 1927: 5 row 3. "Old couple files for divorce"; August 26, 1928: 5 row 5. "Old couple in 70s divorces."

husband, “In order to create an excuse to divorce me, Geunmo invited his friend Jang Jeongju round on May 25 by the lunar calendar, gave him lots to drink, then said to him, ‘I’m going to Seoul. If you sleep with my wife Gyosik while I’m away, I’ll give you a house and a *seom* of millet.’” After they promised each other to go ahead with the plan, Jang forced his way into Gyosik’s room as she slept alone and raped her. In this rare and interesting recent incident, Ok Gyosik also filed for divorce, on the grounds that she could no longer live with her husband, and has made a claim for alimony too. (October 29, 1926: 5 row 1)

This incident was reported after the wife had lost the first trial and was applying for a second. Women also resorted to lying in order to obtain divorces: in one case, a woman claimed that her innocent husband had put poison in her food (March 23, 1929: 5 row 1). Also from the mid-1920s, a very small number of reports show “lack of love” emerging as grounds for divorce. One, from March 27, 1924, (1924: 2 row 4) is titled “The contents of artist Go Hanseung’s divorce petition after ‘Exit from the doll’s house’” and reads as follows:

An artist is involved in a divorce suit. Go Hanseung of 246 Jijeong, Songdo-myeon, Gaeseong, has filed for divorce with Kim Gibok of 145 Gwanhwamun, Seoul. According to the application, Go married the defendant in Taisho Year 2 [1913], after which the couple traveled to Seoul and to Japan, cultivating themselves considerably. But the love between them was not very deep, and the defendant always said to the plaintiff that theirs was a marriage without understanding, that a loveless marriage was like living in a doll’s house, and that since they were both unhappy they should get divorced. In June last year, [the defendant] suddenly left the plaintiff’s home, returned to her own family and has not returned, so he is ultimately filing for divorce.

Meanwhile, in another case, a man named Choe Daeseong (38) reportedly gave his wife Kim (28) 300 won and sent her back to her family, telling her he didn’t want to live with her anymore and that she should find another man. So Kim filed for divorce on September 20 of the same year. In other instances, divorce suits resulted from physical defects or because of a wife’s smoking habit. Yi Sogannan (29) of 477 Yulli-ri, Cheorwon-myeon, Cheorwon-gun, Gangwon-do filed for divorce from her husband of several years Song Wonjun (24; living at the time of the lawsuit at 100 Gwanjeon-ri, Cheorwon-myeon, Cheorwon-gun) on the grounds that he kept abusing her because she was short (December 23, 1925, p. 2 row 8). Meanwhile, another article related how Kim Yongho (21) of Jiam-ri, Nam-

myeon, Pyeonggang-gun had married a certain Miss Yi of Namae-ri, Pyeonggang-myeon, Dong-gun three years previously, but that his wife had secretly been smoking when he and his parents weren't looking, with the result that the couple had agreed to divorce by consent in the presence of both their parents (May 29, 1926: 5 row 9).

This shows us that, in the course of the late 1920s, reasons for divorce suits and divorces grew more diverse, and that instances that seem to correspond to the discourse of the time – namely, attempts to escape “loveless marriages” – occurred. But these are markedly fewer than divorces due to husbands disappearing, being sent to prison for crimes, or abusing their wives; even when they do occur, they are reported as “rare and interesting cases.” They can therefore be regarded as exceptions when it comes to analyzing the trends of the time. Nonetheless, despite their small number and exceptional nature, I presume that such cases will be highly significant in studies of divorce and family change in the 1930s; this is an area that awaits in-depth analysis in future research.

To summarize family change as seen through analysis of divorce suits and divorces in the 1920s, the discourse of the time contained many calls for “free love,” “free marriage,” and “free divorce” and much talk of “women’s liberation,” but changes in the landscape of the family due to divorce suits and divorces at this time did not correspond to the discourse. Rather, these family collapses were the result of divorces filed, once the civil law reform of 1923 allowed them to do so, by women for their own survival, when their husband had been missing for a long time, or was addicted to drugs or alcohol, or when they were no longer able to protect themselves or their families from kleptomania or violence. It follows that family collapses due to intellectual men, educated in line with the trends of free love and free marriage, discourses running through the colonial period, abandoning old-fashioned women occurred only on an insignificant scale. Rather, the emphasis placed on the tragic circumstances of old-fashioned women may be part of the image created by the media at the time to encourage women’s education by devoting large amounts of page space to such stories. Moreover, discourses of “the woman in the family” and “the woman who knows her duty as a wife and daughter-in-law,” which contrast directly with the spirit of modernity and its calls for human and women’s liberation, were generated actively throughout the 1920s. Ultimately, though the high divorce rate of this decade does speak of change in the Korean family, these changes cannot be understood in terms

of the discourses generated by intellectuals and the media at the time; rather, their causes are found in an everyday life where feudalism and modernity intersected, and where far more couples were in conflict, living apart from each other, and in broken families, than the net of divorce statistics could ever capture.

4. Conclusion: The Family as a Point of Intersection between Modernity and Feudalism

This study aims to examine historical changes to the family as it was altered under the action of new discourses of love, marriage, and divorce in the colonial period, viewed in terms of divorce suits and divorces. Magazines published in the 1920s spread discourses of women's liberation and family enlightenment in abundance, while endorsing free marriage based on free love and calling for free divorce and economic independence for women. As if to corroborate this, a fairly high divorce rate was recorded at this time and the civil law reform of 1923, which allowed divorce suits and divorce by consent to be initiated by both men and women, can be understood to have enhanced this liberal zeitgeist.

But when we go beyond the discourses of the time and analysis of contested divorce statistics to collect reports of divorce suits and divorce from the society section of the *Dong-A Ilbo* newspaper in the 1920s, we find that the highest proportion of divorces were due to bad behavior by husbands in the form of crime, alcohol or opium addiction, or abuse and beating of wives. The increase in divorce can therefore be attributed to an expansion of the human rights of women who no longer wanted to endure criminal, drug addicted, or abusive husbands once they were granted the right to file for divorce from them. Only a very small proportion of reports involved women filing for or achieving divorce merely because their husbands had taken concubines; most cases occurred when concubinage was accompanied by abuse of the original wife. In other words, hardly any women filed for divorce merely because their husband had taken a concubine; rather, divorce took place when women were deprived of a livelihood because their husband had left them altogether, or because their lives were at risk from his violence. Divorce at this time, then, was a choice taken by women as a matter of survival and cannot reasonably be regarded as resulting from the influence of discourses calling for "freedom" or

“liberation.”

As we have seen above, this was an era scattered with discourses such as those of “human liberation from the old order” and “free love and marriage,” but the layers of discourse surrounding women became distinct from these, emphasizing passivity, docility, and a spirit of sacrifice on the part of women in the context of love and marriage, showing the female gender being incorporated into and fixed within the institution of marriage. This can be understood to mean that women at this time, even among the waves of the modern discourse of freedom, did in fact accept the taking of concubines by their husbands as long as there was no threat to their own livelihoods or lives.

From the mid-1920s, however, we discover that the feudalistic grain of the previous era that showed continuously in the lives and divorces of women slowly began to be changed by the modern discourses of loving families, based on free love, that were generated in such abundance at the time. Above, we have seen a change to a more active attitude toward divorce, whereby a man applied to divorce his wife because she had left him and not returned, leaving him unable to live in a loveless “doll’s house,” and because he did not love her either; whereby a woman filed for divorce because she could not live with a husband who cared only about art; and even whereby a man arranged for his friend to rape his own wife so that he could end their loveless marriage and live with another woman – and we have seen that these changes occurred even among elderly couples of more than 70 years old.

With the advent of the 1930s, this combined continuity of the unchanging with the appearance of novelty led to divorces of well-known women such as Park Indeok and Na Hyeseok, as well as many other “new women.” Constraints of space give me no choice but to leave the question of how divorce and the resulting changes to the family in the 1920s developed into the 1930s. The conclusion reached through this study is that divorce is not a trifling incident that occurs due to clashes of opinion or personality differences in everyday life, but a significant historical phenomenon that reveals the contradictions and changes of its age. And, as seen above, the high divorce rate that continued throughout the 1920s shows the depth of the cracks appearing in the family of the time, based on feudalistic order. A transition to the “modern family” intermingled with the grain of feudalism at a time when women still tolerated concubinage and bigamy on the part of their husbands and when calls for women’s liberation

mixed with agreement on the passivity of wives and took a dim view of their economic activity.

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