

A DANGEROUS TRADITION: *CHOHON* DISCOURSES AND POPULATION MANAGEMENT IN COLONIAL KOREA

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This study examines the discourses on early marriage that peaked from the late Chosŏn through the colonial era in Korea. It specifically addresses the definition of *chobon* as a harmful Korean tradition, beginning with the criticism of *chobon* as a practice that supposedly led to the downfall of the state in the late Chosŏn. *Chobon* was identified as the cause of women's adultery and husband murders, and it was defined as a pernicious tradition that compromised the security of the state. However, behind the *chobon* discourse, a certain type of politics was in play. By analyzing the definition of *chobon* as a vice, this study confirms that the modern politics of population was involved.

According to these discourses, *chobon* was criticized as a major threat to the security of the society and state, the discourse against it challenged the existing notions of marriage and the family; and repositioned the happy family and the sweet home as the basic unit for the development of the state. The family was believed to be the vital aspect of a modern state, which was therefore used to manage the population. The state and the family were in a complex relationship as the quality of the population was managed to develop a strong nation. The belief that a high-quality population improves national competitiveness and wealth situated *chobon* as harmful to the nation. In Korea, *chobon* discourses were deeply related to Western modernity.

Keywords: early marriage, eugenic marriage, eugenics, population, civilization, national power

1. EARLY MARRIAGE AS A DANGEROUS PRACTICE

On the morning of October 22, 1924, in the seventh Court of Law at the Kyŏngsŏng District Court, the final day of the trial of the “Kim Chŏng-p’il

* This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea Grant funded by the Korean Government (NRF-2008-361-A00005).

Incident” was bringing closure to a deeply disturbing case in colonial Korean society. Crowds filled the courtroom to watch the murderer, the “Lady of Poison.”¹ Public curiosity was aroused by two images: the brutality of the crime and the beauty of the killer. The effect of these combined discordant images was not just because of the “vain attendance of clumsy men.”² This tragic and shocking case was thereafter considered a crime unique to and frequent in Korea, and, therefore, as a distinctly Korean crime. The underlying cause of the crime was believed to be the Korean tradition of *chobon* (early marriage), and colonial-era husband murders were understood as symbolic crimes reflecting the rift between cultural traditions and a new society.

In 1917, Kokubun Sangai, the Minister of Law of the Government-General of Korea (GGK), referred to these murders as female crimes unique to Korea for the first time.³ His opinion was publicly considered “the most clear critique of the failures of Korean conjugality, its harmful effects, and the nature of the Korean wives,” and it acquired discursive authority by being published almost verbatim in the *Chōsen no jinkō genshō* by the GGK in 1927.⁴ Moreover, a series of lengthy papers featuring interviews of imprisoned husband murderers was published in the journal *Chōsen* in 1929 and 1933. A Japanese obstetrician practicing in Korea, Kudō Takeki, wrote to support Sangai’s assertions, using scientific and medical knowledge on criminal physiology and gynecology.⁵ The assertions by Japanese officials and doctors with statistical and medical knowledge persuaded Korean intellectuals. The Korean newspapers *Chosŏn ilbo* and *Tonga ilbo* also published a series of editorials and articles on husband murders from that perspective. In particular, reporter Kim Chŏng-sil wrote a series of articles based almost entirely

¹ “Kim Chŏng-p’il mugŭ ching’yŏk” [Kim Chŏng-p’il imprisonment for life], *Tonga ilbo*, 23 October, 1924.

² “Sasŏl, Sowŭ Chosŏn t’ūgyu pŏmjŏe munje” [Editorial, the problem of a so-called unique crime in colonial Korea], *Chosŏn ilbo*, 24 October 1929.

³ Kokubun Sangai, “Chōsen Fujin no Honfu Satsugai,” [Husband murder by Korean women], *Chosen ihō*, March 1917: 6–23.

⁴ Chōsen Sōtokufu, *Chōsen no jinkō genshō* [The population phenomenon in colonial Korea] (Keijō: Chōsen Sōtokufu, 1927).

⁵ Kudō published the same lengthy paper three separate times. Beginning with the 1929 publishing in *Chōsen* under the title of “Chōsen tokuyū no hanzai: Chōsen fujin no honpusatsugai no fujin kagakuteki kōsatsu” [Crime unique to Korea: Gynecological studies on Korean women who murdered their husbands], in March (166), it was published as seven articles through December of 1929 (175). Moreover, after minor revisions, Kudō published the seven-part, “Chōsen tokuyūno hanzai: Honpu satsugaihan no fujinkagakuteki kōsatsu” [Crime unique to Korea: Gynecological studies on husband murderers], in *Chōsen* between February and August of 1933. The papers were also published in the Japanese journal, *Hanzai-gaku zasshi* [Japanese journal of criminology], from September of 1933 through January of 1935 as a nine-part series.

on Kudō's assertions in *Tonga ilbo*.⁶ As a result, *chobon*, already labeled harmful to the nation, was recast in the 1920s and 1930s as a dangerous tradition unique to Korea.

The phenomenon became even more prominent after the 1930s, when *chobon* discourses expressed strong criticism of old traditions and a desire for social enlightenment. A sense of sympathy was present in this discourse through the word *sobu* (little wife), which often appeared in newspaper articles about husband murders, suggesting that these wives were not completely evil; despite their crimes, they were victims of a dangerous Korean tradition.⁷ The tragic nature of the Korean *chobon* tradition was characterized as pushing pitiable, young brides to kill their husbands.

However, there was a dissenting opinion. In the summer of 1936, a six-week study on social hygiene was conducted in Tal-li, Ulsan-ŭp, Kyōngsang-namdo. Ch'oe Ŭng-sōk, a medical student at Tokyo Imperial University, headed a research team of eight medical school students, one economics student, and three nursing students. They published a report in 1940, three years after the study ended.⁸ Part 5 of their report focused on the gynecological hygiene of the women of the region. Regarding women's age at first marriage, the report stated:

With the worsening quality of life, the age at first marriage for women decreases, while men's increases rapidly. The former reflects early marriage of daughters due to an impoverished lifestyle, while the latter reflects the inability to have a family due to poverty. As such, it is clear that the assertion that Koreans "have a tradition of *chobon*" is false. At the same time, it is also clear that the relationship between marriage and financial

⁶ Kim Chōng-sil, "Ponbu sarhae ŭi sahoejōk koch'al (1)," *Tonga ilbo*, 9 December 1933. This article was published as a twelve-part series through December 24, 1933. The discussion largely reflects Kudō's views, and it exactly references Kudō's discussions.

⁷ Between 1924 and 1940, about 900 articles in *Tonga ilbo* used the keyword *sobu* (little wife). The first time this keyword can be found is in the issue dated May 17, 1924; it appeared nine times more in 1924, and it increased in usage yearly thereafter.

⁸ Chōsen Nōson Shakai Eisei Chōsakai, *Chosen no Nōson Eisei: Kyōngsangnam-do Ulsan-ŭp Tal-li no shakai eisei deki Chōsa* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1940); Im Kyōng-t'aek trans., *Chosŏn ŭi nongch'on wisaeng: Kyōngsang-namdo Ulsan-ŭp Tal-li ŭi sahoe wisaenghakchōk chosa* [Rural sanitation in colonial Korea: social hygienic research in Tal-li, Ulsan-ŭp, Kyōngsang-namdo] (Sōul: Kungnip minsok pangmulgwan, 2008). According to the book's epilogue, the study of rural hygiene was conducted at Tal-li village, Ulsan, Kyōngsang-namdo, because Kang Chōng-t'aek of the Department of Agricultural Studies at Tokyo Imperial University was undertaking a Rural Society Economic Survey in the region, and the authors wanted to take the opportunity to empirically study the medical characteristics of Korean rural regions. The report is organized as follows: Part 1: Economic Survey; Part 2: Food and Nutrition; Part 3: Housing; Part 4: Demographics; Part 5: Issues of Women and Children; Part 6: Physique and Growth; and Part 7: Diseases.

situations should be examined from a social perspective and not from a nationalistic perspective.⁹

The report concluded that the common beliefs about *chobon* in Korea were false, based on the results of the hygiene study in the Tal-li region of Ulsan city on the ages at first marriage of the people in the region. Women's average age at first marriage in the report was 17.02 years. However, ages varied by social class such that, on average, upper class women married at about 18.33 years old, middle class women married at about 17.15 years, A-grade lower class women married at about 16.83 years, and B-grade lower class women married at about 15.90 years.¹⁰ This variation suggested that *chobon* was not a general marriage practice in Korea. Instead, *chobon* in colonial Korea was correlated with poverty or social class. This finding directly contradicted the belief that *chobon* was a generally practiced harmful tradition. It pointed out that *chobon* was more related to social class and education than aspects of culture. Despite such conflicting evidence, no serious debates emerged about *chobon* and its so-called Koreaness, unlike *sati* in colonial India.¹¹ In colonial Korea, *chobon* was simply assumed to be a vile "tradition," for both the official colonial sources like the GGK and the indigenous elites.

So far, there are two types of historical studies on *chobon* in colonial Korea. There are researches that assume *chobon* is a Korean tradition, norm, and harmful practice.¹² The second category approaches the understanding of age at marriage in a complex social context and criticizes the Western and imperialistic perspectives on the age at marriage that should be deemed appropriate for Korea. Assessing Korean marriage practices should account for the relatively short life expectancies of men and women and the peculiarities of its agricultural society.

⁹ In the foreword of this report, the authors noted their gratitude for the "first undertaking of a study of social hygiene in the virgin soil of science of Korean rural regions." The study in social hygiene began in mid-summer of July 1936, was conducted over one and one-half months, and the entire project lasted about three years.

¹⁰ Ibid., 196–197.

¹¹ Limited to the Bengal region of India, the practice of high-class widow immolation, termed *sati*, was studied by Lata Mani regarding its reinvention as an Indian so-called tradition. During the colonial era, colonialists and nationalists converged in their discourses on the topic of women. In colonial India, some nationalists even identified *sati* as representing the emergence of the spirit of India and a tradition to be protected. Please see Lata Mani, "Contentious Tradition: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India," *Cultural Critique* (Autumn, 1987): 119–156.

¹² Kim Tu-hön, "Chöson ūi chohon kwa kü kiwön e kwanhan il koch'al" [A study on the origins of early marriage in Korea], *Chindan hakpo* 2 (1935): 78–79; Yu Süng-hyön, "Ilche ha chohon ūro inhan yösöng pömjoe" [Women's crime caused by early marriage in colonial Korea], in Pak Yöng-ok, ed., *Yösöng: yöksa wa hyönjae* [Women: history and present] (Söul: Kukhak charyöwön, 2001): 357–393.

From this perspective, youthful marriages should not be termed “early” marriages, as though there were an ideal age at marriage.¹³ Several postcolonial studies argued that husband murders demonstrated a colonial construction of tradition.¹⁴

On the other hand, these studies did not analyze the politics underlying the discourse on *chobon* or address the sources of the perspectives on *chobon*. When the discourse on *chobon* was at its peak in 1936, the average age at women’s first marriage, 17.4 years, had not changed much since the late Chosŏn. Indeed, is it possible that practices giving rise to the dangerous crime of husband murder formed a tradition or custom? An additional question is the identity of the epistemic shift that transformed *chobon* into a tradition during the late Chosŏn and early colonial periods. Why were there so many discussions about early marriage in Korea, and why were there no counter-arguments to that claim?

Answering these questions requires discursive analyses of *chobon* and its inherent politics. In this process, the issue of population management in modern Korea can be a central question. This article illuminates the fact that *chobon* was closely linked to the future of the Korean nation in terms of management of the population. Frequent mentions of population and national strength in the *chobon* discourses are symptomatic of this concern about the future. Therefore, this study focuses on the effects of early marriage as an aspect of bio-politics. It analyzes the literature on the politics of knowledge of modern science, medicine, and eugenics. First, it examines the ways that *chobon* was discussed as a morally reprehensible Korean tradition after it ended and the reasons for the change. Then, it considers the ways that *chobon* became relevant to population management with a eugenics

¹³ Kim Kyŏng-il, “Ilcheha chohon munje e taehan yŏn’gu” [A study concerning early marriage under Japanese colonial rule], *Han’guksa nonjip* [The journal of Korean history] 41 (2007): 363–395; Pak Kyŏng, “Kaehwa chisigin tŭl ui chohon e taehan insik” [The ‘Enlightened’ Intellectuals’ perception of the issue of early marriages], *Yŏsŏng kwa yŏksa* [Women and history] 16 (2012): 69–96; Chŏn Mi-gyŏng, “Kaehwagi chohon tamnon ŭi kajok yulli ūisik ŭi hamŭi [An implied meaning of family ethical consciousness of early marriage discourse during the enlightenment period of Korea], *Taehan Kajŏng hakboechi* 39, no. 9 (2001): 189–207.

¹⁴ Chang Yong-gyŏng, “Singminji ki ponbu sarhae sakŏn kwa yŏsŏng chuch’e” [Husband-murder and the female subject in colonial Korea], *Yŏksa wa munbwa* [History and culture] 13 (2007): 105–125; Hong Yang-hŭi, “Singminji Chosŏn ŭi ponbu sarhae sakŏn kwa chaehyŏn ŭi chŏngch’ihak: Chosŏn chŏk pŏmjoe ŭi kusŏng kwa singminji chŏk chŏnt’ong” [The incidence of husband-murder in colonial Korea and the politics of representation: The construction of Korean crime and colonial tradition], *Sabak yŏn’gu* 102 (2011): 79–114; Hong Yang-hŭi, “Singminji sigi ‘ŭihak,’ ‘chisik’ kwa Chosŏn ŭi ‘chŏnt’ong’: Kudŏ ŭi ‘puin kwahak’ chŏk chisik ŭl chungsim ūro” [‘Medical knowledge’ and ‘tradition’ of colonial Korea: Focusing on Kudŏ’s “Gynecology” based knowledge], *Ŭisabak* 22, no. 2 (2013): 579–616; Park Jin-kyung, “Husband Murder as the ‘Sickness’ of Korea: Carceral Gynecology, Race, and Tradition in Colonial Korea, 1926–1932,” *Journal of Women’s History* 25, no. 3 (2013): 116–140.

focus. Last, it discusses the ways that *chobon* is criticized from the perspective of the management of the quality of the population.

2. DEFINING EARLY MARRIAGE AS A BARRIER TO ADVANCEMENT

Korean society experienced internal and external forces of rapid change during the 1880s. Diplomatic relations were established with several Western countries, which opened economic and cultural doors. Internally, the idea of Kaehwa [Enlightenment] became influential. The ideas about appropriate ages at first marriage first emerged as an issue in this socio-historical context. During the Korean government's implementation of economic development policies, the practice of early marriage was criticized. The first public question was raised in an 1886 article published in the *Hansŏng chubo*:

Various countries consider the early marriage of men and women as a vile practice and forbid such a practice via various means. This is to allow men and women time to learn their livelihood before marriage. It is said that men and women in various countries do not dare to marry early. ... The timing of marriage of Japanese men and women differ; men are married at 22 years and 3 months and women at 19 years and 4 months, on average. Moreover, the ages at marriage of various European countries are recorded as follows.¹⁵

The *Hansŏng chubo* and *Hansŏng sunbo* were the first modern Korean newspapers, published by the Korean government in the 1880s with mostly Kaehwa leanings. The article quoted above pointed out that numerous countries banned early marriage because they considered it harmful, and it presented the average ages at first marriage for men and women in Japan and some European countries. Some European countries, including Russia and Great Britain, had older average ages at first marriage than Japan. Moreover, the average ages at first marriage of men in the Netherlands, Italy, and Denmark were over 30. Korean women's average age at first marriage was 17 or 18 years at the end of the Chosŏn Dynasty. According to a study that analyzed the family registers of the Tansŏng region in the eighteenth century, women's average age at first marriage was 17.5 years; men's was 18 years.¹⁶ Another study examined marriage letters sent to brides' families

¹⁵ *Hansŏng chubo*, No. 5 March 1, 1886. Russia 25.2, 21.5; England 28.7, 25.5; Sweden 29.2, 26; France 30.2, 24.9; Italia 30.2, 25.4; Holland 30.9, 28; Belgium 31.3, 28.5.

¹⁶ Kim Kŏn-t'ae, "18-segi chohon kwa chachon ūi sahoesa" *Yŏksa wa hyŏnsil* 51 (2004): 195–223.

by grooms' families and found that the overall average ages at first marriage in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries were 16.23 years and 17.38 years for men and women, respectively.¹⁷

However, Koreans did not perceive themselves as marrying early until they began to learn about the family formation practices of the West. The critical perception of early marriages was formed only in contrast to the West, particularly in Europe and Japan. This was evident in the reason that the *Hansŏng chubo* was published because it was a newspaper published by the government to introduce Western scientific knowledge to Korea and promote Kaehwa through understanding international contexts.¹⁸

Similar perceptions were echoed in periodicals that followed the *Hansŏng chubo*. Sŏ Chae-p'il founded the *Tongnip sinmun* in April of 1896 after he studied in the United States. His intention was to enlighten the people, and, therefore, the outlet criticized Koreans' tendency to marry at a relatively young age before they knew much about marriage, which was unlike "other people's countries."¹⁹ The article "Theory of Marriage," published on July 20, 1899, was particularly critical of the Korean people for following meaningless codes of conduct and customs and abiding by the harmful tradition of marrying their children off as young teenagers. It approvingly pointed to the marriage customs of the West as a better model. The article concluded with the statement "The ways of marriage of the Western people are detailed and practical, and they deserve praise."²⁰ This article is an example of the extent to which the Korean intellectuals of the period promoted Western norms of marriage.

After 1905, criticism of *chobon* increased for two reasons. First, a sense of crisis that the nation was at risk peaked. Diplomatic rights were being stripped away by Japan, and national power was needed more than ever before. People who believed in the theory of Enlightenment strongly criticized *chobon* as a reason for the downfall of the nation. Yun Ch'i-ho, editor-in-chief of the *Tongnip sinmun*, stated in a speech at the Taehan Chaganghoe on the subject of the advantages and disadvantages of early marriage that "while the advantage of *chobon* is only individual and private, its harmful influence is nationwide and public." He insisted that Koreans "have to revive national power by eliminating early marriage."²¹

¹⁷ Pak Hŭi-jin, "Yangban ŭi honin yŏllyŏng" *Kyŏngje sabak* 40 (2006): 8–16.

¹⁸ Han Po-ram, "1880-yŏndae Chosŏn chŏngbu ŭi kaehwa chŏngch'aek ŭl wihan kukche chŏngbo sujip" *Chindan hakpo* 101 (2006): 291–339.

¹⁹ "Chohon chi p'ye" [The harmful influences of early marriage], *Tongnip sinmun*, 6 June 1896.

²⁰ "Honin ron" [Discourse on marriage], *Tongnip sinmun*, 20 July 1899.

²¹ "Chohon ŭi ihae" [Advantages and disadvantages of early marriage], *Hwangŏng sinmun*, 23 July 1906.

Yun summarized four harmful consequences of early marriage. First, the children produced by early marriages are more vulnerable to early death, stunted development, or generally poor health. Second, the children's poor conditions impede their brain growth, which leads to an inability to think critically. This outcome was believed to be caused by the parents' inability to focus on education because of the demands of married life. Third, early marriages were believed to be responsible for the poor treatment of women, low-quality family relationships, and discordant households. Fourth, there were negative economic consequences. The people of the so-called civilized nations were financially independent when they got married, but teenagers in Korea who married relied on their families, sought immediate convenience, and avoided suffering from the stresses of married life. This was believed to be a "great national loss."²² When *chobon* was directly related to the fate of the nation, it became known as a bad custom that should be brought to an end to ensure the future security of the nation and its people.

In addition, Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War gave further impetus to the civilization project. Many people believed that Japan's expeditious adoption of Western culture and the subsequent reforms in Japan formed the basis of its national power. A general reverence for the Western powers and their superiority strengthened the criticisms of *chobon*:

In all corners of the world, there is not a single state where the practice of early marriage is as destructive as in ours. ... Before the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese watched the evil customs of early marriage run rampant and customs, such as intermarriage, weakened the race. Thus, early marriage was firmly banned after the Restoration, and men and women could not marry before 18 or 20 years of age ... thereby developing knowledge and strength as a result of a united civilization, and becoming a nation that equaled the great powers of the world. The strengths and the lifespan of the race and the survivability of the nation is determined by the timing of the marriage. ... It is certain that the vitality of the nation is being damaged by early marriage.²³

Supporters of the civilizing mission in Korea believed that Japan had achieved the status of a world power by accepting aspects of Western culture. They pointed out that the Japanese race, which had once been weak, forbade early marriage and strived to maintain hygiene, thereby becoming a nation equal to the Western

²² Ibid.

²³ Kim Kyu-jin, "Chohon ūi p'ye" [The harmful influences of early marriage], *Sŏu* 8 (1907): 20–22.

powers. They argued that the harmful national tradition of *chobon* should be eliminated to make Korea a stronger state, following the Japanese example, which would result in “forever raising a strong race and intelligent people to cultivate the spirit to achieve the everlasting independence of the nation.”²⁴

According to Fukuzawa Yukichi, the *de facto* pioneer of Japanese modernization, “discourses on the harmful consequences of early marriage” were widespread in Japan during the Meiji period.²⁵ He pointed to the popular logic of asserting the disadvantages of early marriage, including financial difficulties and the weak constitutions of parents and children, although he pointed out that late marriages also could have negative consequences. It seems that negative views on early marriage were widespread in Japan—a perspective mainly adopted from the West. The opposition to early marriage symbolized a strong affinity for Western modernization.

The Korean discourse on *chobon* was based on the contrast between Korean and Western family practices. Contrasting Korean *chobon* to Western non-*chobon* practices recast the contrast between an uncivilized Korea and a civilized West. The identity of the nation was at the center of the debate, which inevitably led to conflict between the powerful West and weak Korea. In a series of articles in *Taehan Hakboe wŏlbo* by Mun Sang-u, titled “Chohon ūi p’yehae”, the discourse reached its zenith:

Countries engaging in *chobon* inevitably face a decreasing population and countries engaging in late marriage inevitably face an increasing population. Therefore, our Korea shows a decreasing trend in population. The powers show a significant increase ... early deaths ... and medicine does not prosper ... and the biggest reason is the lack of the elementary substance, and the lack of elementary substance owes itself only to *chobon*. Its negative effects lead to ... a never ending decrease in population. As the population continues to decrease, the fate of the entire nation can be predicted, and nine out of ten people sigh loudly and cry over this matter.²⁶

Strong nations like Britain, France, Germany, and the United States Why do crumbling nations crumble and strong nations prosper? The reasons may vary, but when marital customs are examined, strong nations

²⁴ Ibid., 22.

²⁵ Fukuzawa Yukichi, “Sōkon kanarazusimo gaiaru arazu (46),” *Fukuō hyakuma* (Tōkyō: Jiji Shinpōsha, 1897); *Fukuzawa Yukichi Chosakushū* 11, (Tōkyō: Keiō Gijuku Daigaku Shuppankai, 2003): 115–117.

²⁶ Mun Sang-u, “Chohon ūi p’yehae(sok)” [The harmful influences of early marriage], *Taehan Hakboe wŏlbo*, vol. 7, 25 September 1908.

do not practice *chobon* and the crumbling nations do not practice late marriage. ... Among the crumbling nations, the most tragic and miserable is India, and the one with the highest number of *chobon* is also India. Therefore, a nation practicing *chobon* cannot but crumble, and a nation practicing late marriage cannot but prosper. As such is the theory, we must consider and not ignore this.²⁷

In the editorial, ages at first marriage and national prosperity were perceived as being strongly related. According to the editorial's logic, *chobon* weakens newborns' health and wellbeing and increases infant mortality, which, in turn, decreases the national population; on the other hand, relatively late marriages lead to healthy babies that increase the population. In the discourse, the size of the population was assumed to be a determining factor for the future success of the nation. Therefore, a nation practicing *chobon* would necessarily fail and a nation with late marriages would prosper. The assertion that strong nations eliminated traditional early marriage, and the nations that did so were the successful ones, demonstrated that Western practices were superior. This perspective suggests that there was a great awe in Korea regarding the prosperity of Western societies.

Chobon became a national issue in two senses. First, to the intellectuals producing the public discourses at the time, *chobon* symbolized the backwardness of the Korean culture. Phrases about harmful customs and customs that should be eliminated implied that the negative effects of *chobon* were its risks of harm to humans and society. Another national aspect of *chobon* was that to the intellectuals of that time, the risks were linked to population management and that the failure to resolve them could destroy the nation. Their attacks on *chobon* identify the reasons that Korea was falling behind and led to their advocacy of late marriage, which again demonstrated a strong belief in Western culture.

3. EARLY MARRIAGE AS A VICE AND THE DESIRE FOR A SUPERIOR RACE

Chobon as a vile practice hostile to civilization remained strong in the transition from the late Chosŏn Dynasty to colonial Korea. In addition to the deployment of colonial discourses on the so-called backwardness of Korea to justify colonization, *chobon* as a vice was related to population management to produce a national people. Perhaps that characterization explains why the colonialists and national elites wanted to manage the population to increase its size and quality to further national prosperity. This is generally the reason that the government

²⁷ Ibid.

intervened regarding the traditions and customs that did not further that goal. Korean elites deployed the same discourse as the Japanese. Under the definition of *chobon* as a vice, a high-quality population could be achieved through reproduction (births) because healthy babies were of primary importance to the formation of a superior population. From this perspective, early marriage was problematic, as explained in this article published in the *Tongnip sinmun*:

The reason that Western races are so dominant in demeanor ... is because of their late marriage after the age of 21, which is beneficial to men and women with high levels of energy and a strong foundation of character. Their offspring naturally prosper and have an increasing population effect year after year. One most harmful custom exists in Korea. It is that the children will have to marry in their early teens and those who are married do not even understand what it means to be a husband or wife. The *Ŭm* and *Yang* [i.e. men and women] are merged forcefully, so the faces lose their color and they are sickly. How would the offspring coming from such bodies not be weak, and live to be old? This is the reason why the Korean population cannot prosper further.²⁸

Because it posed a threat to the common belief that population size directly relates to national strength, *chobon* was believed to be the main cause of the weakening of national power. Marriage was actively discussed in the discourse on the relationship between reproduction and population, which is why the Japanese Meiji government, hoping for national prosperity and a strong military, had acted quickly toward the “controlling of sex and reproduction” to qualitatively and quantitatively strengthen its population.²⁹ Yi Kwang-su explained that “the optimal ideal of reproduction is the maximum production of sound and talented children and educating them completely,” and that appropriate marriages would be the “most optimal ideal of humankind.”³⁰ The marriage problem “was a core problem that needed emergency resolution for the future of our people”³¹ because of the belief that bearing perfect humans would qualitatively enhance the population and thereby increase the prosperity of the state and the people.

In the 1920s and 1930s, doctors strengthened the logic, particularly those who had studied Western medicine, and Western science and medicine were promoted

²⁸ “Chami innan mundap” [Interesting catechism], *Tongnip sinmun*, 20 June 1899.

²⁹ Sawayama Miyako, Yi Ŭn-ju, trans., *Yuga ūi t’ansaeng* (Sōul: Somyōng, 2014).

³⁰ Yi Kwang-su, “Honin e kwanhan kwan’gyōn,” *Hakchigwang* 12 (1917): 29.

³¹ Yi Kwang-su, “Honin ron” [Discourse on marriage], *Maeil sinbo*, 20 November 1917; Pak Sōng-jin. *Saboe chinbwaron kwa singminji saboe sasang* [Social Darwinism and social thought in colonial Korea] (Sōul: Sōnin, 2003): 20–30.

as the absolute truth. In the “Roundtable on *chobon*,” hosted by the *Nongmin sinmun*, Dr. Yun Ch’i-hyŏng approached *chobon* from the perspective of “public health in its second generation.”³² According to him, inappropriately timed marriages resulted in relatively lower birthrates than other countries and the children were unhealthy.³³ Dr. Yi Kap-su, a graduate of the Kyŏngsŏng Medical Professional School and University of Berlin, agreed that the harmful effects of *chobon* were that “our heirs of the next generation will not be strong, and they will have a weak physical constitution, leading to all forms of malignant diseases, which will be an enemy to the eugenics of mankind.”³⁴ During this period, one of the most important concerns was the health of the next generation. Children born from weak children would be even weaker, and it was predicted that they would suffer from numerous diseases. Metaphorically, they asserted that an immature seed could not bear good fruit, and *chobon* became the enemy of humankind’s prosperity. Thus, marriage was discussed from the standpoint of human eugenics.

Based on ideas about choice and exclusion, eugenics was an applied biological science and ideology imported from Great Britain that aimed to improve the genetic quality of the human population by nurturing the fittest individuals and eliminating those judged as unfit. Francis Galton (1822–1911) gave eugenics an academic standing and scientific perspective, defining eugenics as a science that studied “all agencies which can improve the racial quality of future generations.”³⁵ Galton’s eugenics converted Darwin’s theory of natural selection into applied artificial selection for human advancement and social improvement. At that time, eugenics was believed to be the best way to exercise the politics of the body. Galton sought racial improvements by controlling marriage and reproduction, as he felt that the British Empire was retreating,³⁶ and it was not coincidental that intellectuals in the late Chosŏn and colonial Korea understood *chobon* from the

³² “Chohon e kwanhan chwadamhoe” [Discussion meeting regarding early marriage], *Chosŏn nongmin* 4, no. 9 (1928): 29. This roundtable was held in Kugil-kwan in downtown Kyŏngsŏng (Seoul) on November 11, 1928. It featured people from all levels of society, such as Pak Ch’ang-hun (a doctor), Yi Ch’ang-hwi (a lawyer), Chu Yo-han (editor-in-chief of the *Tonga ilbo*), Yu Kwang-yŏl and Pae Sŏng-nyong (Social Department of the *Chosŏn ilbo*), Chŏng Chong-myŏng and Pak Ho-jin (Kŭnu-hoe), Ch’oe Ŭn-hŭi (a reporter for the *Chosŏn ilbo*), Yi Ton-hwa and Kim Ki-jŏn (members of Ch’ŏndogyo), Pang Chŏng-hwan (Kaebyŏk Publishing Company), and Yi Sŏng-hwan (Chosŏn Agricultural Publishing).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Yi Kap-su, “Namnyŏ kyŏrhon yŏllyŏng, Namnyŏ myŏssal ttae ũi kyŏrhon i chŏkhap han’ga” [Marriageable ages of men and women: What are the ideal ages for men and women to get married], *Pyŏlgŏn’gon* 19 (1929): 61.

³⁵ Kim Ho-yŏn, *Usaenghak, yujŏnja chŏngch’i ũi yŏksa* [Eugenics, the history of geno-politics] (Sŏul: Ach’im isŭl, 2009): 53–129.

³⁶ Ibid.

perspective of racial improvements.

From the late 1920s, blunt claims were made that marriages should be based on eugenics. It was the advent of the concept of the “eugenic marriage.” The *Maeil sinbo* published a four-part article, entitled “Marriage and Eugenics,”³⁷ in which the production of a superior race was discussed as an important consideration for marriage. The article suggested a need to wisely select marriage partners to bear “good children,” and that “one mistake could lead to the misfortune of generations.”³⁸ Mothers’ genetic backgrounds, particularly regarding intelligence, were salient.³⁹ Some experts criticized early marriage for its negative effects on creating a superior race. Dr. Yi Kap-su, a prominent voice regarding the harmful effects of *chobon* and the founding secretary and director of the Chosŏn Eugenics Association, delivered speeches at eugenics lectures.

When *chobon* was linked to eugenics, the discourse turned to determining appropriate ages at first marriage to produce healthy children. To yield strong people, an appropriate age needed to be determined. Dr. Yi Kap-su introduced non-Korean case studies about the ways that “healthy sexuality yielded strong people,”⁴⁰ and he suggested optimal ages at first marriage for men and women.⁴¹ According to him, those optimal ages to produce healthy children were age 28 for men and age 20 for women; men at age 29 and women at age 21; and men at age 30 and women at age 23. People should marry and bear children at those ages because women and men biologically peaked between ages 20 and 38 and between ages 28 and 48, respectively.⁴² The argument was that a high rate of pregnancies during those ages would avoid the diseases common to relatively young and old first-time mothers.

Moreover, women’s ages at first marriage were considered more important than men’s because women were believed to be more important than men for bearing qualitatively superior children. It was believed that pregnancies in women older than the age of 30 increased premature or toxic births and that younger women

³⁷ *Maeil sinbo*, October 9, 1932; October 11, 1932; October 12, 1932; October 13, 1932.

³⁸ *Maeil sinbo*, October 12, 1932.

³⁹ *Maeil sinbo*, October 13, 1932.

⁴⁰ According to him, men in ancient Greece could marry between the ages of 35 to 40, and women over 30 could marry; in Germany, men over age 25 were allowed to marry, and women were allowed to marry over the age of 22.

⁴¹ Yi Kap-su, “Namnyŏ kyŏrhon yŏllyŏng, Namnyŏ myŏtsal ttae ūi kyŏrhon i chŏkhap han’ga,” *ibid.*, 62. The same content was published in “Ūihak sang kyŏrhon’gwan” [Views of marriage from a medical perspective (2)] by Yi Kap-su, in the November 28, 1930, edition of the *Chosŏn ilbo*. It also appeared in “Kyŏrhon kwa yŏllyŏng” [Marriage and age] in *Usaeng* 1(1934) under his pen name Misusaeng: 18–19.

⁴² *Ibid.*

fared better in childbirth. It was believed that the “children of a young mother are superior” and that “it was the role of a civilized person to control the newborn to improve the quality, rather than the quantity, of children.”⁴³ One newspaper article proposed age 21 as the optimal age for women to marry so that they could complete their childbearing by age 30. It was thought women bear an average of three children before age 30 when the first birth is at ages 21 or 22 and births are spaced about two or three years apart. The idea was that childbirth after age 30 was accompanied by relatively physical and mental stressors in childrearing, and dystocia (difficult births) lowered brain activity in those children.⁴⁴

The approach of eugenics to age at first marriage also concerned *manbon* (late marriage). This was a contradictory position because in the 1910s *manbon* was related to relatively advanced societies. In 1915, the *Maeil sinbo* newspaper published the example of Confucius’ father, Shuliang, who was forty-five years old when Confucius was born, and praised the “enormous benefits of late marriage from the perspective of race betterment.” The superiority of *manbon* was supported by the notion that the offspring of those who married early have “insufficient patience,” and that “they are not born intelligent.”⁴⁵ However, from the late 1920s until the 1930s, *manbon* became a target of criticism, and “the harmful effects of *manbon*” were as numerous in the discourse as were the vices of *chobon*. From the perspective of eugenics, *manbon* and *chobon* were equally problematic.

The criticisms of *manbon* defined *manbon* as a social problem that occurred during the same period when the definition of *chobon* as a vice was spreading. A *Maeil sinbo* editorial stated “The harmful effects of *manbon* are comparable to those of *chobon*.” Although traditional *chobon* was a continuing practice, *manbon* was a “Korean phenomenon of the majority of young people in metropolitan areas ... following the worldwide practice of late marriages.” The article then claimed “the core reason that young people avoided marriage had been financial instability,” but “especially in the times of uncertainty and anguish, people had to marry at the right time.”⁴⁶ In practice, poor women often married younger, and poor men often married older, than the optimal ages. The author stated that “[because] *manbon* can bring negative results in the reproductive aspect, and also in the

⁴³ *Maeil sinbo*, 16 December 1930.

⁴⁴ “Yōja ūi kyōrhon yōllyōng ūn 21se ka chōktang,” [The proper women’s age at marriage is twenty-one], *Tonga ilbo*, 23 April 1938.

⁴⁵ “Kyōrhon ūn myōsse ka chōktang halkka” [What are the proper ages for marriage], *Maeil sinbo*, 13 May 1915.

⁴⁶ “Chohon man motchi anhūn manhon ūi p’yehae” [The harmful consequence of late marriage is equivalent to those of early marriage], *Maeil sinbo*, February 1, 1938.

psychological and moral aspects, people [should] marry at the optimal age[s] for marriage despite minor economic instabilities.”⁴⁷ A *Tonga ilbo* editorial demonstrates the opinion at the time that society should be responsible for making people marry at the “biologically proper age.” Marrying at the optimal ages was believed to be the “way to eugenics and prosperity of mankind” and the “most natural course of human life.”⁴⁸

Therefore, early marriage was a barrier to achieving a high-quality population. The production of a high-quality population was the task of the state, the society, and humankind, and it was perceived as being the source of national strength and prosperity.

4. EARLY MARRIAGE AS A VICE: TO ACHIEVE HAPPY CONJUGALITY

While *chobon* was being criticized as a barrier to a superior race, there were also criticisms of *chobon* as the reason for conflicts between couples and in the family. The focus on *chobon* as a vice shifted to a focus on its harmfulness to happy families and household harmony. The discourse during the colonial era included criticisms stated in an article published by the *Tongnip sinmun*⁴⁹ showing that *chobon* was defined from the perspective of Western marriage. *Chobon* was discussed relative to household peace in the following excerpt:

To prevent this ... the modern civilized nations set the age of marriage by the (*sic*) law. This shows that the influence of marriage extends beyond [the] individuals of a married couple to the society and to the state. Of course, it is not an exaggeration to assert that the first chapter of happiness in our lives is such that a woman and a man, with similar levels of knowledge, with fullest muscle development, energy, self-determination entering adulthood (averaging 25 years old), and a period of love, build the knowledge and strength necessary to continue on a completely independent life in this state of survival for competition in the society, and agree to marry, leading to a loving sexual lifestyle and a happy, ideal family. This was the original goal of marriage. The forceful marriage of young children for the purpose of being ‘in-laws’ does not lead to the logical relationship between a husband and wife, and [a] natural sexual lifestyle.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ “Sasöl, kyörhon yölyöng e taehayö,” [An editorial on marriageable ages], *Tonga ilbo*, 10 September 1935.

⁴⁹ “Honin ron” [Discourse on marriage], *Tongnip sinmun*, July 20, 1899.

⁵⁰ Kang Int’aek, “Na üi pon Chosön süpsok üi i sam” [Several customs that I observed in colonial

The article points out that the primary reason that *chobon* caused family conflicts was that it was a characteristic of a forced marriage. Marriages were decided by parents and not by the individuals being wed, and unions were formed even when the partners did not know each other. On the other hand, the Western approach to marriage is individualistic. Ideally, a man and a woman work or go to school together and engage in a dating relationship; they learn about each other's interests, talents, virtues, and lifestyles; if they choose to marry, it is based on those factors.⁵¹ The Western perspective is that two people marry when they both feel that it is a good match, yielding happy relationships.

Second, financial independence for couples that marry young is impossible because they are not prepared, psychologically or financially, to form independent households. Getting “married without the foundations of managing an independent livelihood,” or “being sufficiently able to be free in activity from an economic standpoint” was not considered a benefit to society.⁵² Therefore, women should be “married after they receive education on being refined as a wife, as a mother, or as a person.”⁵³ If not, they remain dependent on their parents, which causes conflict and leads to discord in the household. Chŏng Chong-myŏng, a socialist feminist, argued that *chobon* was a vice of quickly marrying off a son to gain a daughter-in-law in the household to boss around.⁵⁴ Perhaps this underlies *sijjipsari*, in which a husband's parents abuse the daughter-in-law, which is a highly criticized problem in the married lives of Korean women. From this perspective, *chobon* was an obvious subject of criticism among feminists.

A third concern was the physiological difficulty of developing a happy conjugality. Two problems could arise. On the one hand, it was believed that individuals married through *chobon* had unhealthy lives because of diseases or failure to thrive. Thus, there were opinions that, by engaging in “chaotic household duties, including pregnancy and childrearing, the women's bodily functions cease to develop, and, furthermore, lead to disabilities.” Moreover, it was believed that if “the development of the mind and intellect is not sufficient,” a woman would not be a “good partner to her husband.”⁵⁵ It was thought that early marriage impeded intellectual and mental development as well as physiological development.

Korea], *Kaebiyŏk* 5 (1920): 82–83.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² “Chohon e kwanhan chwadamhoe”, 29.

⁵³ “Myŏssal i kajang chŏktang han kyŏrhon yŏllyŏng in'ga” [What are the proper ages for marriage], *Chosŏn ilbo*, 8 November 1926.

⁵⁴ “Chohon e kwanhan chwadam hoe”: 30.

⁵⁵ “Myŏssal i kajang chŏktang han kyŏrhon yŏllyŏng in'ga,” *ibid.*

Chohon was also regarded to induce sexual neurasthenia in the male reproductive organs. It was argued that the weakening of the nerves of the reproductive organs could occur through “overly frequent sexual intercourse, masturbation, and unnatural intercourse,” which then led to a weakening of the nerves throughout the entire body, symptoms of dizziness, and cold hands and feet.⁵⁶ The biggest problem was believed to be excessive sexual intercourse, which supposedly occurred because “sexual intercourse [was] overly frequent from the ages of 16 to 17,” which led to the “premature overworking of the reproductive organ nerves.”⁵⁷ Therefore, it was reasoned that the “core cause of overly frequent sexual intercourse at a young age” was the “vile Korean tradition of *chohon*,” making it an “important item for discussion for the sake of the health of the entire Korean race.”⁵⁸ In sum, marriage at an age when the body has not matured was considered “extremely harmful to the health and the development of the couple” and was similar to asking them to grow into trees bearing healthy fruit after planting them as immature seeds.⁵⁹

On the other hand, the most important concern at the time was sexual conflict between the spouses. Because young couples married before the age of full reproductive ability, they could not have happy sex lives. Therefore, they should marry at an age “when the bodies have sufficiently developed and can handle sex life well,” meaning that, from the physiological perspective, men’s and women’s normal sex lives were only possible after the “full development of the reproductive cells.”⁶⁰ Thus, the timing of marriage was very important:

The development of sexual desires before maturation of the reproductive cells is unnatural and not good. On average, the first menstruation period begins around age 15 or 16. However, the first period does not indicate that the womb is sufficiently developed for pregnancy. At this stage, there are no feelings related to reproduction, and women suffer mentally and physically as a result. The sexual development of men is complete two or

⁵⁶ Kim Tong-ik, “Chohon ūro saengginūn saengsikki sōngsin’gyōng soeyakchūng (1)” [Sexual neurasthenia caused by early marriage (1)], *Tonga ilbo*, 27 February 1932.

⁵⁷ Kim Tong-ik, “Chohon ūro saengkinūn saengsikki sōngsin’gyōng soeyakchūng (2)” [Sexual neurasthenia caused by early marriage (2)], *Tonga ilbo*, 28 February 1932.

⁵⁸ Kim Tong-ik, “Chohon ūro saengginūn saengsikki sōngsin’gyōng soeyakchūng (3)” [Sexual neurasthenia caused by early marriage (3)], *Tonga ilbo*, 1 March 1932.

⁵⁹ Yi Kap-su, “Namnyō kyōrhon yōllyōng, namnyō myōssal ttae ūi kyōrhon i chōkhap han’ga” [Marriage age of men and women, what is the appropriate age for marriage by gender], *Pyōlgōn’gon* 19 (1929): 62; Yi Kap-su, “Ūihak sang kyōrhon’gwan” [Views of marriage from a medical perspective (1), (2)], *Chosōn ilbo* 26 November 26, 28 November 1930.

⁶⁰ “Kyōrhon yōllyōng ūn myōssal i chōktang han’ga (1)” [What are the appropriate ages for marriage], *Maeil sinbo*, 13 December 1930.

three years after the women. From the time the man's voice changes, the reproductive abilities continue until he is old. However, on average, sexual desires persist until age forty and are well in every regard. ... As such, the most appropriate timing for marriage is when the sexual desires have peaked, or when the conceiving power is the strongest.⁶¹

It was asserted that women apparently required sufficient time for their wombs to develop after their first periods; for men, sexual maturity began when their voices deepened, which was about two or three years after women began to menstruate. Dr. Pak Ch'ang-hun pointed out that the female reproductive organs develop at about ages 15 to 16 years, but girls have only a "baby womb, which is not fully mature," and "a woman's womb is fully developed at the age of 20."⁶² The general medical understanding at the time seems to be that the best age for women to marry was at about 20 years old. Dr. Yi Kap-su suggested that a couple could achieve the "purpose of their instincts" if they married after reproductive development was complete, and that they should "marry at adulthood when both are mature."⁶³

The consensus was that the optimal time to marry and have a happy life was after both parties were mentally and physically ready for reproduction. What was this age? The combinations of ages for marrying were "according to the natural laws of humankind" and were suggested by Dr. Yi Kap-su as shown in Table 1.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² "Chohon e kwanhan chwadamhoe," *ibid.*

⁶³ Yi Kap-su, "Namnyō kyōrhon yōllyōng, namnyō myōssal ttae ūi kyōrhon i jōkhap han'ga" [Marriage age of men and women, what is the appropriate age for marriage by gender], *Pyōlgōn'gon* 19 (1929): 61.

⁶⁴ Yi Kap-su, "Ūihak sang kyōrhon'gwan (2)" [Views of marriage from a medical perspective], *Chosōn ilbo*, 28 November 1930.

Age of <i>chobon</i>		<i>Chobon</i> , comparative		Most Optimal age of marriage		<i>Manbon</i> , comparative		Age of <i>manbon</i>	
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
20	16	24	18	28	20	31	23	37	28
21	16	25	18	29	21	32	24	38	28
22	17	26	19	30	22	33	25	39	29
23	17	27	19	Optimal age of marriage		34	26	40	29
				28	21,22	35	27		
				29	20,22	36	27		
				30	20,21				

Table 1: Combination of ages at first marriage by Doctor Yi⁶⁵

Table 1 shows that the ages at first marriage to abide by the natural law of monogamy regarding sexual activity were 28 to 30 for men, and 20 to 23 for women.⁶⁶ The optimal age combinations were 28 and 20 years, 29 and 21 years, and 30 and 22 years for men and women, respectively. In contrast, Dr. Pak Ch’ang-hun proposed the best ages for marriage were at about 25 years for men and 20 years for women, which was the most common combination suggested by the critical *chobon* discourses, although there was some flexibility in the standard. Yi Kap-su situated men’s optimal age slightly older than the standard, which increased the age gap between men and women. These standards were characteristic of the period. The optimal age at first marriage was important to ensure the bearing of high-quality children, for “a loving sex life and a happy, ideal household,” and it was the condition for a successful “first chapter of worldly happiness.”⁶⁷

One important distinction of the age at first marriage combinations was that of older men with younger women. As men age toward the *manbon* ages, the gendered age at first marriage gap increases, likely due to the belief that women’s sexual peak is younger than men’s; that women have different physiological constitutions, such as relatively younger reproductive development; and that

⁶⁵ Yi, Kap-su, “Üihak sang kyörhon’gwan (2)” [the views of marriage by medical perspective], *Chosön Ilbo*, November 28, 1930.

⁶⁶ Yi Kap-su, “Namnyö kyörhon yölyöng, namnyö myössal ttae üi kyörhon i chökhap han’ga” [Marriage age of men and women, what is the appropriate age for marriage by gender], *Pyölgön’gon* 19 (1929): 62; Yi Kap-su, “Üihak sang kyörhon’gwan (2)” [Views of marriage from a medical perspective], *Chosön ilbo*, November 28, 1930.

⁶⁷ Kang In-t’aek, “Na üi pon Chosön süpsok üi i sam” [Several customs that I observed in colonial Korea], *Kaebhyök*, Vol. 5 (1920): 82.

women have earlier declines in reproductive capacity.⁶⁸ Doctors often suggested sexual problems would arise between husbands and wives of *chobon* marriages based on these differences. In particular, sexual desires supposedly occur at a younger age in women than in men, which leads to “frustration of sexual desires.”⁶⁹ Older women married to younger men were often thought of as “wasting their [the wives’] youth” without an appropriate sexual lifestyle.⁷⁰ Thus, the belief that the ages at marriage should be different for men and women led to the idea of older men marrying younger women.

It was believed that a marriage that ignores physiological differences in timing between the partners would result in conflicts. This belief led to the myth that sexual and emotional incompatibilities would encourage the pursuit of sexual gratification outside the marriage, and was the rationale supporting men’s use of concubines. Kim Ki-jŏn, a Ch’ŏndogyo official, proposed that, in Korean traditional marriage, “women married at adulthood, but men married at childhood,” and “physiologically, it was difficult to restrain oneself without concubines.”⁷¹ As well, for women, *chobon* was considered to be a reason for adultery.⁷² Perhaps a more serious social problem was that female adultery could lead to criminal behavior. The Japanese obstetrician, Kudo, summarized the discourse.

What comprises adultery in Korea differs slightly from other countries. The reasons ... for adultery are hatred of the husband, the use of violence by the husband in the women’s quarters, the weakness of the husband in his inability to complete sexual intercourse, and the seeking of sexual consolation ... from men other than the husband. ... The most unique thing about the adultery committed by Korean females is their ages. As a result of the rampant practice of *chobon* ignoring the physiological

⁶⁸ Yi Kap-su, “Ŭihak sang kyŏrhon’gwan (1)” [Views of marriage from a medical perspective], *Chosŏn ilbo*, 26 November 1930; “Chohon e kwanhan chwadamhoe,” *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Yi Kap-su, “Namnyŏ kyŏrhon yŏllyŏng, namnyŏ myŏssal ttae ũi kyŏrhon i chŏkhap han’ga” [Marriage age of men and women, what age is appropriate for marriage by gender], *Pyŏlgŏn’gon* 19 (1929): 62; Yi Kap-su, “Ŭihak sang kyŏrhon’gwan (2)” [Views of marriage from a medical perspective], *Chosŏn ilbo*, 28 November 1930.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ “Chohon e kwanhan chwadamhoe”: 29.

⁷² According to Japanese Criminal Law, Article 183, enacted in Korea under the Criminal Ordinance of Chosŏn in 1912, adultery applied only to married women. Whereas a married man’s concubines were legal under the Criminal Law, married women’s adultery was punished. Yi Kak-chong, *Chubae hyŏngpŏp chŏnsŏ* [Annotated compendium of criminal law], (Kyŏngsŏng: Kwangdongsŏguk, 1913): 141.

development of the female reproductive organs and the sex life of women is facilitated unnaturally in Korea.⁷³

This quotation effectively states that female crimes begin with female adultery and end in husband murder, all caused by the practice of *chobon*, which ignored the physiological status of women. This logic sought legitimacy from authoritative Western medicine, gynecology, and criminology.⁷⁴ Yu Kwang-nyul, a reporter for the *Chosŏn ilbo*, observed during his frequent visits to police stations and courts of justice that the majority of female crimes were rooted in *chobon*.⁷⁵ He noted incidents in which young women met old men, hated their husbands as mortal enemies, poisoned them, and then used arson to escape the husbands' (if still alive) and in-laws' abuses. Adultery was believed to result from broken relationships between husbands and wives of *chobon* marriages when the wives fell in love with other men.

In sum, *chobon* was not a simple matter of conjugal unhappiness. It was consistently recast as a public issue, a dangerous marital tradition that facilitated women's criminal behavior. It supposedly created a domino effect, causing problems at home that, in turn, created wider social problems in the community, and, ultimately, created problems for the state.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the discourses on early marriage that peaked from the late Chosŏn through the colonial era in Korea. It specifically addresses the definition of *chobon* as a harmful Korean tradition, beginning with the criticism of *chobon* as a practice that supposedly led to the downfall of the nation in the late Chosŏn. *Chobon* was identified as the cause of women's adultery and husband murders, and it was defined as a pernicious tradition that compromised the security of the state. However, behind the *chobon* discourse, a certain type of politics was in play. By analyzing the definition of *chobon* as a vice, this study confirms that the modern politics of population was involved.

The following specific conclusions can be drawn. First, *chobon* was a 'dangerous tradition' invented through the lens of modernity, or in contrast with Western

⁷³ Kudō, "Shakai Fujin Kagaku no kanten yori-Chōsen Fujin no Hanzai o ronzu" [Discuss the crime of Chosŏn women from social gynaecological perspective] *Chōsen* 256 (1936): 46–47.

⁷⁴ Criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso drew the following conclusions based on interviews with females imprisoned in Korea. That is, Korea was a unique social context that induced a potential fury innate to females caused by "falsified sexual desires," which was *chobon*.

⁷⁵ "Chohon e kwanhan chwadamhoe": 33.

cultures, during the late Chosŏn and early colonial era Korea. The evaluation of the Korean age at first marriage as being relatively early was juxtaposed against an imagined Western society and its norms. Encounters with Western societies resulted in active acceptance of Western norms about marriage for national prosperity, which was promoted by the intellectuals of late Chosŏn. *Chobon* was situated to starkly contrast with Western ideas about marriage, and it became a cultural symbol of Korea as being weak and backward, at least in the minds of Koreans. Ultimately, Korea's *chobon* practices versus the later-marrying West led to a specific discourse of a weak Korea versus the powerful West. *Chobon* thus became a subject of severe criticism as a marriage practice because it was supposedly harmful to the nation, which increased the appeal of Western societies' practice of marrying later.

Second, the modern politics of population were present in the discourses on *chobon* because the strategies of population management by the state reflected the core characteristic of *chobon* as a vice. To manage the population's quality, *chobon* was criticized in two ways. One, *chobon* was problematic for the achievement of a perfect race, which was part of the rationale that a larger, healthier population would improve national power. Eugenics was the core of the 1930s' discourse. Moreover, the perspective of eugenics condemned *manhon* as well as *chobon* for undermining a healthy population. Eugenics promoted the notion of the "eugenic marriage," in which couples marry at optimal ages to guarantee healthy offspring. To determine those ages, physiological knowledge was suggested to identify the optimal ages for eugenic marriage, whereas medical knowledge of biological differences between men and women led to the gender age gap between older husbands with younger wives.

On the other hand, *chobon* was also criticized for its negative effects on marital happiness. Because it was linked to forced marriage, the inability to maintain independent households, and sexual discord, *chobon* was argued to be a cause of marital conflict. This conflict was believed capable of damaging the ability of the population to maintain a high level of quality because a high-quality population was believed not to end just when a healthy child is born. It was also achieved by nurturing and training children in the desired direction. The primary responsibility for raising children was the family and household, and the family had responsibility for giving birth, nurturing, and educating children. Therefore, healthy childrearing would create the population desired by the state. Happy conjugal relationships were considered an important part of managing the quality of the national population.

In addition to these factors, *chobon* also directly conflicted with the educational system, which was the most important management device of the state. Although

management of the quality of the population was managed through the mechanism of education, people who married young were difficult to educate. Schools were important tools for developing people for the state as well as for themselves. The focus on education was the reason that the news media of late Chosŏn advocated for modern education to attain national prosperity. In the past, the quantitative increase of the population was directly related to national power; however, in the present modern age, the quality of the population is recognized as a more important concern to manage. Therefore, the modern method focuses on developing individuals' talents that directly relate to national prosperity. It is currently believed that population size is not the source of wealth, although size was a valid consideration when the country was focused on production and building wealth.

Finally, what is the source of the difference between the idea of *chobon* as a tradition and Ch'oe Ŭng-sŏk's denial of *chobon* in the 1940 Tal-li report based on research in 1936? From the perspective of Western modernity, the Korean age at first marriage was relatively young. According to the results of empirical studies of rural villages, the average ages at first marriage in the colonial era were similar to those of late Chosŏn at about 17 years old. What does this mean? Considering the life expectancy of rural Koreans at the time, and the characteristics of Korea's agricultural society, perhaps the ages at first marriage were reasonable.

Based on the results of his on-site study of an agricultural village in colonial Korea, Ch'oe argued that "the conventional wisdom that Koreans engage in *chobon* is false." Although marriages at ages younger than 15 existed, early marriage was not generally practiced. Youthful marriage tended to be the sales of destitute low-class daughters to old, single men or the residential transitions of a wife-to-be to her future husband's household to supplement the labor supply. These marriages were not common in late Chosŏn and colonial Korea, and they were closely linked to poverty. The increasing number of crimes committed by young brides seems to correlate with Korea's poverty during the economic crisis of the 1930s. Ch'oe concluded that *chobon* was a socioeconomic phenomenon driven by poverty, rather than a practice stemming from racial differences.

Fundamentally, the differences between Ch'oe's opinion and the *chobon* discourses in the extent of sensitivity toward the Korean age at first marriage were differences between realities and ideals, or regarding the politics of discourse. From Ch'oe's perspective as a scholar who conducted research on people in colonial Korea, Koreans did not have problematic marriages. The difference between the Korean agricultural lifestyle and an idealized Western modernity was the reason that two entirely different assertions could be made about the same phenomenon.

In conclusion, the historical discourse on *chobon* had a logic that emerged from growing conflict between husbands and wives, social crime, and a sense of national crisis. *Chobon* was vilified as a major threat to the security of the society and the state. It destroyed the beliefs of the existing marriage and family; and identified the happy family and sweet home as the basic unit of the state for its own promotion. The need for a stable family was believed to be the most basic aspect of the modern state and it was, therefore, used to manage the population. The state and the family developed a close relationship through which the quality of the population was managed to develop a strong nation. This pursuit derived from the belief that a high-quality population would improve national competitiveness and wealth, which situated *chobon* as being inimical to the state. In Korea, *chobon* was the subject of a discourse centered on Western modernity.

Submitted: August 30, 2016

Sent for revision: November 1, 2016

Accepted: December 8, 2016

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