

Examining the Role of Culture in Maternal Filicide in Korea, 1948-62

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Previous research on maternal filicide has noted a lack of resources and mental illness as important causal factors. Although most scholars accept that filicide should be understood in an appropriate cultural context, the processes by which macro-level structures such as culture and ideology are embodied in the situated behaviors of offenders and victims have been insufficiently explored. This paper explores maternal filicide in Korea from 1948 to 1962. It finds that cultural factors unique to mid-twentieth century Korea, such as polygyny and shame, influenced the characteristics of maternal filicide in ways that differentiate it from the West.

Keywords: Filicide, Korean homicide, Confucianism, polygamy, polygyny

Introduction

The study of filicide poses a problem for theories of criminology. Children are a source of social attachment, providing parents with new roles and routines that remove them from criminogenic influences, a meaningful identity, and an emotional bond to the conventional order.¹ The contention that marriage and children have prosocial effects,² however, assumes the primacy of the nuclear family as the basic unit of social organization, and overlooks stem families—multigenerational households beyond the nuclear family unit—that may exist in non-Western settings. The fact that parents kill their offspring in primarily single-victim, single-offender incidents, without the facilitating influence of delinquent peers who provide definitions conducive to crime, and the absence of material gain militates against the application of rational choice and differential association theories of crime.³

A study of maternal filicide in Korea from a cultural perspective is warranted for several reasons. First of all, South Korean society should be viewed as a communitarian one that binds its members in a set of interdependencies⁴ and understood relative to Confucianism. As some scholars have argued, Confucianism shapes the laws that define offenses as violations of legal statutes and the punishment that offenders receive.⁵ Although Confucianism originated in China, its spread throughout Korea was mediated by the influence of Taoism and Buddhism.⁶ It was adopted as the guiding state philosophy in 1392 during the Chosŏn dynasty.⁷ It has been argued that Neo-Confucianists solidified their patriarchal authority and privilege during this period through the creation of *chokpo* and *sŏwon*.⁸ This “Koreanized” form of Neo-Confucianism had an enduring influence on Korean families, privileging status and age and shaping the gender roles and expectations of women in ways that marginalized them.⁹ According to Andrew Nam, Korean women were expected to obey their fathers

¹ Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub, “Turning Points and the Future of Life-Course Criminology: Reflections on the 1986 Criminal Careers Report,” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 53, no. 3 (2016): 321–35.

² Robert J. Sampson, John H. Laub, and Christopher Wimer, “Does Marriage Reduce Crime? A Counterfactual Approach to Within-Individual Causal Effects,” *Criminology* 44, no. 3 (2006): 465–508.

³ Ronald V. Clarke and Derek B. Cornish, “Modeling Offenders’ Decisions: A Framework for Research and Policy,” *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research* 6, (1985): 147–85; Ross L. Matsueda, “Testing Control Theory and Differential Association: A Causal Modeling Approach,” *American Sociological Review* 47, no. 4 (1982): 489–504.

⁴ John Braithwaite, *Crime, Shame and Integration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 85.

⁵ Sohyeon Park, “Thinking with Chinese Cases: Crime, Law, and Confucian Justice in Korean Case Literature,” *Korea Journal* 53, no. 3 (2013): 5–28.

⁶ William A. Callahan, “Negotiating Cultural Boundaries: Confucianism and Trans/national Identity in Korea,” *Cultural Values* 3, no. 3 (1999): 329–64.

⁷ Uichol Kim and Young-Shin Park, “Confucianism and Family Values: Their Impact on Educational Achievement in Korea,” *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft* 3, no. 2 (2000): 229–49.

⁸ Jin Woong Kang, “Political Uses of Confucianism in North Korea,” *The Journal of Korean Studies* 16, no. 1 (2011): 63–87; Eugene Y. Park, “Old Status Trappings in a New World: The ‘Middle People’ (*Chungjin*) and Genealogies in Modern Korea,” *Journal of Family History* 38, no. 2 (2013): 166–87.

⁹ Kyung-Sup Chang, “The Neo-Confucian Right and Family Politics in South Korea: The Nuclear Family as an Ideological Construct,” *Economy and Society* 26, no. 1 (1997): 22–40; Chung-Hyun Baik, “Some Influences of Confucianism on Korean Christian Family Life: Confucian? Christian? Or Confucian-Christian?” *Theology Today*

prior to marriage, defer to their husbands after marriage, and elderly women were expected to obey their adult sons.¹⁰ Confucianism as a cultural ideology thus constrained women by emmeshing them in a cascading series of dependencies in ways that were qualitatively different from their Western counterparts.¹¹

The relevance of Confucianism to the study of filicide in Korea resonates with some of the key debates in sociology. Confucianism may be viewed as a recurring set of structures, ideologies, and practices that are used as a resource for action.¹² This view enables researchers to discern the ways in which cultural values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms shape violence.¹³ Confucianism may also be viewed as a structure with “an underlying logic of its own.”¹⁴ This view reconciles the static aspects of structure by reproducing social structure through social action.¹⁵ Thus, the principles of Confucianism that gird the foundations of Korean society, principles such as *chǒng* (loyalty), *hyo* (filial piety), *in* (benevolence), and *sin* (trust), embody the duality of structure and agency in Pierre Bourdieu’s “habitus”¹⁶ and Norbert Elias’s “figuration” and “personality structure.”¹⁷

A theory of culture ought to explain the empowering character of structures as well as the capacity of a subject to act in opposition to structures that may constrain him or her.¹⁸ The problem of structure and agency is particularly relevant for the study of maternal filicide as psychiatrically-oriented theories of maternal filicide lean toward the agentic—individual action—aspects of the sociological debate. The inclusion of culture in the study of filicide leads to the question of how belief systems such as Confucianism shaped maternal filicides in Korea.

This paper examines maternal filicide in Korea. It defines maternal filicide as incidents where biological, step-, and adoptive mothers killed their biological, step-, and adopted offspring. The study explores maternal filicide in Korea over a 14-year period, from the inception of the First Republic (1948) to the beginnings of the Third Republic (1962). It provides a sociological examination of cultural factors that may have been significant in these filicides and evaluates the applicability of contemporary theories of criminology to particular historical contexts. The study makes use of descriptive statistics to illuminate the general characteristics of filicide, for example, the incident type, motivation, and means of killing an offspring. It then explores two unique themes in Korean cultural ideology—concubines,

76, no. 3 (2019): 242–51.

¹⁰ Andrew C. Nam, “History,” in *An Introduction to Korean Culture*, eds. J. H. Koo and A. C. Nam (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 1997), 39–98.

¹¹ Braithwaite, *Crime, Shame and Integration*, 92.

¹² Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (1986): 273–86.

¹³ Sheldon Hackney, “Southern Violence,” *The American Historical Review* 74, no. 3 (1969): 906–25.

¹⁴ Sharon Hays, “Structure and Agency and the Sticky Problem of Culture,” *Sociological Theory* 12, no. 1 (1994): 65.

¹⁵ William H. Sewell, Jr., “A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation,” *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (1992): 1–29.

¹⁶ Loïc Wacquant, “A Concise Genealogy and Anatomy of Habitus,” *The Sociological Review* 64, no. 1 (2016): 67.

¹⁷ Bowen Paule, Bart van Heerikhuizen, and Mustafa Emirbayer, “Elias and Bourdieu,” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 12, no. 1 (2012): 86.

¹⁸ Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, “What Is Agency?” *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (1998): 962–1023.

shame—that shaped the offense, the offender, and the characteristics of the victim.

Review of the Literature

Filicides make up a small portion of homicides in society. They represent about 15 percent of homicides in the U.S.¹⁹ According to national aggregate data from Australia and the U.S., fathers and mothers are equally likely to commit this crime.²⁰ However, when psychiatric populations are examined, women are more likely to commit filicide.²¹

Research on filicide, whether from a historical, psychiatric, or criminological perspective, has suggested that the desperation that young, unwed mothers face is due to a lack of resources.²² The accumulation of stress that these women face from out-of-wedlock births, the demands of childrearing, and the absence of male partners have been posited as factors that compel women to commit filicide.²³

The presence of psychiatric disorders and mental illness in those who commit maternal filicide has been a dominant theme in prior filicide studies.²⁴ These have noted that such mothers are likely to have experienced depression, mood disorders, psychosis, personality disorders, and suicidal ideations.²⁵ It should be noted, however, that filicidal mothers are

¹⁹ Timothy Y. Mariano, Heng Choon (Oliver) Chan, and Wade C. Myers, “Toward a More Holistic Understanding of Filicide: A Multidisciplinary Analysis of 32 Years of U.S. Arrest Data,” *Forensic Science International* 236 (2014): 46.

²⁰ Mariano et al. “Toward a More Holistic Understanding of Filicide”; Victoria Nagy and Georgina Rychner, “Longitudinal Analysis of Australian Filicide Perpetration Trends: Filicide in Victoria, 1860–1920,” *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 10, no. 2 (2021): 50–66, <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcsd.1642>.

²¹ Nagy and Rychner, “Longitudinal Analysis of Australian Filicide Perpetration Trends”

²² Salih M. Eke, Saba Basoglu, Bulent Baker, and Gokhan Oral, “Maternal Filicide in Turkey,” *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 60, no. S1 (2015): S143–51, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.12560>; Mehdi Ben Khelil, Ilhem Boukthir, Ons Hmandi, Mongi Zhioua, and Moncef Hamdoun, “Trends of Infanticides in Northern Tunisia: A 40 Years Study (1977–2016),” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 95 (2019): 104047, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104047>.

²³ Li Eriksson, Paul Mazerolle, Richard Wortley, and Holly Johnson, “Maternal and Paternal Filicide: Case Studies from the Australian Homicide Project,” *Child Abuse Review* 25, no. 1 (2016): 17–30. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2358>.

²⁴ Suzanne Léveillé, Jacques D. Marleau, and Myriam Dubé, “Filicide: A Comparison by Sex and Presence or Absence of Self-Destructive Behavior,” *Journal of Family Violence*, 22, no. 5 (2007): 293.

²⁵ Alberto D’Argenio, Giorgia Catania, and Marco Marchetti, “Murder Followed by Suicide: Filicide-Suicide Mothers in Italy from 1992 to 2010,” *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 58, no. 2 (2013): 419–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.12057>; KyuHee Jung, Heesong Kim, Eunsam Lee, Inseok Choi, Hyeyoung Lim, Bongwoo Lee, Byungha Choi, Junmo Kim, Hyejeong Kim, and Hyeon-Gi Hong, “Cluster Analysis of Child Homicide in South Korea,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 101 (2020): 104322, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104322>; Maya Krischer, Michael H. Stone, Kathrin Sevecke, and Eckhard M. Steinmeyer, “Motives for Maternal Filicide: Results from a Study with Female Forensic Patients,” *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 30, no. 3 (2007): 191–200; Amy McKee and Vincent Egan, “A Case Series of Twenty One Maternal Filicides in the UK,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 37, no. 10 (2013): 753–61; Sophie Raymond, Marie-Victoire Ducasse, Marion Azoulay, and Ivan Gasman, “Maternal Filicide and Mental Illness: A Descriptive Study of 17 Women Hospitalized in a French Secure Unit over a 24-Year Period,” *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 66, no. 5 (2021): 1818–28; Peter Sidebotham and Ameeta Retzer, “Maternal Filicide in a Cohort of English Serious Case Reviews,” *Archives of Women’s Mental Health* 22, no. 1 (2019): 139–49.

not psychopaths.²⁶ Killing one's children as revenge against a spouse has also been well-documented, most likely to occur as a response to a partner's infidelity or termination of the relationship.²⁷

Some have argued that filicides should be understood in their historical and cultural contexts.²⁸ Shame stemming from the stigmatizing of extramarital affairs that result in unwanted pregnancies, a cultural preference for sons,²⁹ and out-of-wedlock births have been noted as key cultural factors that shape filicides in many countries.³⁰ Gender-role expectations also appear to play a significant role in the punishment that filicidal mothers receive. Amon et al., for example, found that mothers who commit filicide are not punished as harshly as fathers.³¹ Similarly, a number of studies have discovered that juries are likely not to prosecute young mothers for infanticide, instead attributing the death to an accident³² or charging them with lesser offenses.³³ In the same vein, Wiest and Duffy found that mothers are much more likely to be found not guilty by reason of insanity and sentenced to mental health institutions rather than prisons.³⁴ However, the situation in Korea appears to be the opposite. Kim, Gerber, and Kim claim that

²⁶ Hanna Putkonen, Sabine Amon, Markku Eronen, Claudia M. Klier, Maria P. Almiron, Jenny Yourstone Cederwall, and Ghitta Weizmann-Henelius, "Gender Differences in Filicide Offense Characteristics—A Comprehensive Register-Based Study of Child Murder in Two European Countries," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 35, no. 5 (2011): 319–28; Ghitta Weizmann-Henelius, Hanna Putkonen, Matti Grönroos, Nina Lindberg, Markku Eronen, and Helinä Häkkänen-Nyholm, "Examination of Psychopathy in Female Homicide Offenders — Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the PCL-R," *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 33, no. 3 (2010): 177–83; Hanna Putkonen, Ghitta Weizmann-Henelius, Nina Lindberg, Markku Eronen, and Helinä Häkkänen, "Differences between Homicide and Filicide Offenders; Results of a Nationwide Register-Based Case-Control Study," *BMC Psychiatry* 9 (2009): 1–8, 27, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-244X-9-27>.

²⁷ Peter G. Jaffe, Marcie Campbell, Laura Olszowy, and Leslie Hazel Anne Hamilton, "Paternal Filicide in the Context of Domestic Violence: Challenges in Risk Assessment and Risk Management for Community and Justice Professionals," *Child Abuse Review* 23, no. 2 (2014): 142–53; Melanie Moen and Christiaan Bezuidenhout, "Killing Your Children to Hurt Your Partner: A South African Perspective on the Motivations for Revenge Filicide," *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling* 20, no. 1 (2023): 33–47.

²⁸ George B. Palermo, "Murderous Parents," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 46, no. 2 (2002): 123–43.

²⁹ Michelle Oberman, "Mothers Who Kill: Cross-Cultural Patterns in and Perspectives on Contemporary Maternal Filicide," *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 26, no. 5 (2003): 493–514.

³⁰ Mensah Adinkrah, "Maternal Infanticides in Fiji," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 24, no. 12 (2000): 1543–55, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134\(00\)00208-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134(00)00208-8); Mensah Adinkrah, "When Parents Kill: An Analysis of Filicides in Fiji," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 45, no. 2: (2001): 144–58, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X01452002>; Gülhan Balsoy, "Infanticide in Nineteenth Century Ottoman Society," *Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 6 (2014): 976–91; Salmi Razali, Jane Fisher, and Maggie Kirkman, "'Nobody Came to Help': Interviews with Women Convicted of Filicide in Malaysia," *Archives of Women's Mental Health* 22, no. 1 (2019): 151–58.

³¹ Sabine Amon, Hanna Putkonen, Ghitta Weizmann-Henelius, P. Fernandez Arias, and Claudia M. Klier, "Gender Differences in Legal Outcomes of Filicide in Austria and Finland," *Archives of Women's Mental Health* 22, no. 1 (2019): 165–72, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00737-018-0867-5>.

³² Katie M. Hemphill, "'Driven to the Commission of This Crime': Women and Infanticide in Baltimore, 1835–1860," *Journal of the Early Republic* 32, no. 3 (2012): 437–61, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jer.2012.0049>.

³³ Ian Pilarczyk, "'So Foul a Deed': Infanticide in Montreal, 1825–1850," *Law and History Review* 30, no. 2 (2012): 575–634.

³⁴ Julie B. Wiest and Mary Duffy, "The Impact of Gender Roles on Verdicts and Sentences in Cases of Filicide," *Criminal Justice Studies* 26, no. 3 (2013): 347–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1478601X.2012.733873>.

married women who kill other family members, including children, face harsh punishment due to their actions violating Confucian-influenced gender norms.³⁵

Shortcomings of Previous Research

In criminology, researchers have generally looked at culture in one of three ways. The first of these is that the dominant culture and its values represent an underlying source of crime.³⁶ In this view, culture assumes prominence in a strain model of crime, as the lack of a legitimate means to attain symbols of success leads to a refutation of cultural ideals, which then leads to the adoption of subcultural values that result in violence.³⁷

The second view is that the existence of a distinct culture may spawn violence. This is explained as a function of unique geographical forces that may create a regional personality structure that is conducive to violence.³⁸ For example, Ousey and Lee argue that people residing in the southern regions of the United States possess more tolerant attitudes toward the use of violence.³⁹ Looked at in this way, culture is an affirmative resource with which to mobilize “cultural habits, skills, scripts, and styles” that shape strategies of actions in homicide events.⁴⁰

Finally, while cultural criminology examines the meaning that is assigned to crimes and the politics of negotiating the definition of offenses,⁴¹ it does not provide a precise definition of culture or explain the processes through which cultural values are transmitted into crimes.⁴² As such, although researchers acknowledge the role of culture, they have not investigated how such macro-level concepts become embodied in the situated behaviors of offenders and victims. The current paper examines the unique ways in which cultural ideologies such as Confucianism constrained and empowered filicidal mothers in Korea.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study used the *Chosun ilbo* (朝鮮日報), a major Korean newspaper, as its data source. We

³⁵ Bitna Kim, Jurg Gerber, and Yeonghee Kim, “Does the Victim–Offender Relationship Matter? Exploring the Sentencing of Female Homicide Offenders,” *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 62, no. 4 (2018): 898–914.

³⁶ Albert K. Cohen, *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1955), 28.

³⁷ Shane Blackman, “Subculture Theory: An Historical and Contemporary Assessment of the Concept for Understanding Deviance,” *Deviant Behavior* 35, no. 6 (2014): 496–512.

³⁸ Hackney, “Southern Violence,” 906–25.

³⁹ Graham C. Ousey and Matthew R. Lee, “The Southern Culture of Violence and Homicide-Type Differentiation: An Analysis across Cities and Time Points,” *Homicide Studies* 14, no. 3 (2010): 268–95.

⁴⁰ Matthew R. Lee, “Reconsidering Culture and Homicide,” *Homicide Studies* 15, no. 4 (2011): 324.

⁴¹ Jeff Ferrell, Keith Hayward, and Jock Young, *Cultural Criminology: An invitation* (London: Sage, 2008).

⁴² Martin O’Brien, “What Is *Cultural* about Cultural Criminology?” *British Journal of Criminology* 45, no. 5 (2005): 599–612.

used the paper to identify filicide cases between January 1, 1948, the year of the inauguration of the First Republic, and December 31, 1962, the end of the first full year of military rule during the Third Republic.

Digital copies of the newspaper are available on a commercial website.⁴³ Our research assistant sifted through the newspaper to identify articles related to homicides, generally through the appearance of terms such as “homicide” and “murder” in the initial stages of case selection. We then carried out a more refined search if the term “*sarin*” (murder/homicide) appeared, particularly if the term “*chasik*” (offspring) appeared next to *sarin* or its lexical/sentential equivalents. *Chasik sarin* literally translates to “offspring murder” and is the closest Korean equivalent of filicide. This resulted in the compilation of a total of 76 completed or attempted incidents of maternal filicide. After selecting these cases, we then created a coding instrument containing 14 variables to further refine the data for analytical purposes. We then analyzed the data using data management software (Excel).

For the present study, we examined four key variables. The first was the sex of the offender and his or her relationship to the victim (biological, step-, adopted offspring). We then classified maternal filicides into five categories: incidents in which biological mothers killed their son or daughter; incidents in which stepmothers killed their adopted or stepson or stepdaughter; incidents in which both parents killed their biological, step-, or adopted offspring; mass killing incidents; and incidents where the killer could not be identified.

The second variable was the age of victims and offenders. Unfortunately, it proved impossible to ascertain this in all cases as the newspaper reported only an age range for some offenders and victims (e.g., 20s, 30s) rather than their precise ages. The third variable was the level of intent present in the offense. We coded incidents as “premeditated” if the offender had planned the killing in advance, “spontaneous” if the killings occurred without prior planning (e.g., an argument), “hitman” if the offender used a third party to carry out the killing, and “accidental” if the offender killed an offspring while trying to kill someone else (e.g., wife). Where intent was impossible to determine, we coded the incident as “unknown.”

The final variable was putative motivation, which we ascertained from the descriptions in the newspapers. We used “life’s difficulty” when a lack of material resources was the primary motivation behind the killing. “Child becomes a source of domestic discord” related to incidents where the principal conflict between spouses was related to and aggravated by the presence of their offspring. On the other hand, we used “domestic dispute” where the principal conflict between the spouses was related to domestic issues, but unrelated to their offspring (e.g., poor household management). In cases where the filicide covered up behavior that could have been considered shameful (e.g., birth of an illegitimate child), we used the code “hide evidence of illicit behavior.” Finally, we used “extension of ongoing abuse/discipline” if the killing resulted from excessive punishment or physical abuse. As with the third variable, we used “unknown” if motivation could not be determined.

The following sections will investigate these four variables in greater detail using narrative

⁴³ *Chosŏn nyusŭ raibŭrŏri*, <https://newslibrary.chosun.com>.

excerpts and descriptive statistics. We will then identify and examine the unique cultural characteristics of maternal filicide in Korea.

Results

In the current study, we identified 76 incidents where biological mothers and stepmothers killed their biological, step-, and adopted offspring. In these 76 incidents, 81 offenders killed 88 victims. Approximately 77 percent of the offenders whose ages were available (77 of 81) were in their 20s and 30s, while 11 percent were in their 40s. About 85 percent of the victims were less than 11 years old, while over 10 percent of victims were over the age of 20.

The majority of the cases involved mothers who killed sons and daughters in single-offender, single-victim incidents; however, four incidents involved multiple offenders. Similarly, the number of victims exceeded the incident count because some offenders killed 3 or more victims in a single incident. Approximately 65 percent of filicides were premeditated, while 17 percent occurred without prior planning. We could not determine intent in 17 percent of the cases. Apart from these general features of Korean maternal filicides, there were a number of notable cultural factors that influenced the profiles of victims and offenders and the characteristics of the offenses.

The Significance of Concubines in Korean Culture

Biological mothers were responsible for killing their children in the majority of the cases (61.8 %). Stepmothers committed almost 28 percent of the filicides.

Table 1: Maternal filicide incidents by type

n=76	#	%
Biological mother kills son	14	18.4
Biological mother kills daughter	18	23.7
Biological mother kills unknown sex infant	15	19.7
Stepmother kills step/adopted son	11	14.7
Stepmother kills stepdaughter	10	13.1
Both biological parents kill child	2	2.6
Mass killings	3	3.9
Infant discovered; no known offenders	3	3.9
		Total=100

While some research has presented stepmothers as the offenders most likely to perpetrate violence on their non-genetic offspring,⁴⁴ a close reading of the newspaper accounts revealed previously overlooked identities of stepmothers in Korean families. Stepmothers who killed their stepchildren were most often first wives (*ch'ō*)—wives who were legally recognized as spouses. However, second wives (*ch'ōp*) were also implicated in filicides. Often, both wives lived under one roof. The closest English translation of *ch'ōp* is a concubine, although legal and cultural differences exist between the two terms. As something of a pseudo-marriage, concubinage existed in Korea as the prerogative of powerful men who used women from the lower classes to fulfill their sexual desires and enhance their status.⁴⁵ Moreover, concubines could be abandoned without legal repercussions.⁴⁶ The following is a typical case:

Excerpt 1: Case#⁴⁷ 09011957

Police in South Chōlla Province reported that the wife of Hong S-G (age 37), Han H-H (age 34), poisoned the daughter of Hong's concubine and killed her. About four years ago, Hong brought a second wife [chop] named Kwon M-S (age 23) to live in the same marital home. Han was already angry at having to live under the same roof with her husband's second wife; however, the birth of a baby by the concubine kindled her fear that her husband would divorce her, so she poisoned the infant with lye water.

There are several noteworthy points here that highlight the role of Korean culture in maternal filicides. First, the presence of multiple wives attests to the practice of polygyny—taking multiple wives in one household.⁴⁸ A concubine's offspring automatically became

⁴⁴ Grant Harris, N. Zoe Hilton, Marnie E. Rice, and Angela W. Eke, "Children Killed by Genetic Parents Versus Stepparents," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 28, no. 2 (2007): 85–95.

⁴⁵ Yung-Hee Kim, "A Critique on Traditional Korean Family Institutions: Kim Wōnju's 'Death of a Girl,'" *Korean Studies* 23 (1999): 30–31.

⁴⁶ Sun Joo Kim, "My Own Flesh and Blood: Stratified Parental Compassion and Law in Korean Slavery," *Social History* 44, no. 1 (2019): 6.

⁴⁷ The case numbers are organized in the following way. The first four digits refer to the date on which the offense was reported in the newspaper. The last four digits refer to the year. For example, Case# 09011957 refers an incident that was reported on September 1, 1957. All of the cases originate from *Chosun ilbo*.

⁴⁸ We deliberately employ the term "polygyny" rather than "polygamy" for the following reasons. In China, once concubines produced offspring, they were afforded legal protections and were entitled to rights to property, inheritance, and family lineage. See Yue Du, "Concubinage and Motherhood in Qing China (1644–1911): Ritual, Law, and Custodial Rights of Property," *Journal of Family History* 42, no. 2 (2017): 162–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0363199017695726>. This legal acknowledgement of concubines in medieval China seems consistent with the practice of polygamy. Korean concubines, however, did not enjoy such legal recognition or protections. Korean concubines (*ch'ōp*) could be abandoned and their offspring openly discriminated against by the state. The discrimination that Korean concubines and their children faced based on their tenuous status differs significantly from the form of polygamy in China. Therefore, we use the term polygyny—informal multiple marriages without legal protections—to describe taking on multiple wives in one household in Korea. We are grateful to Reviewer #1 for this point. See Jisoo M. Kim, "From Jealousy to Violence: Marriage, Family, and Confucian Patriarchy in Fifteenth-Century Korea," *Acta Koreana* 20, no. 1 (2017): 91–110; Sun Joo Kim, "My Own Flesh and Blood," 6.

the stepchild of a first wife. Out of the 76 cases, 23 incidents involved stepmothers as the principal perpetrators; however, 39 percent (n=9) of these filicides involved children of second wives as victims or the concubines as offenders. In mid-twentieth century Korea, where vestiges of polygyny persisted,⁴⁹ legitimate first wives became de facto stepmothers to the children of concubines. The concubines then became stepmothers to the children of first wives if husbands abandoned their first wives and selected their concubines as permanent partners. The concubines were also powerless to protect their offspring from the wrath of first wives in blended households.

The second notable point here is that the presence of multiple wives amplified domestic conflicts between the adults. While historians have examined the interpersonal discord that arises between two women in the same household due to jealousy,⁵⁰ our work shows that jealousy is transformed into filicidal violence that is directed against children. Polygyny expanded the pool of victims in Korean households and pitted women against women, culminating in the deaths of children. Two mass killings involved concubines who became so despondent at the abusive treatment that they and their offspring received from their mothers-in-law and the first wives in multigenerational, blended households that they attempted or completed mass killings of their children and then committed suicide.

The Role of Shame in Maternal Filicides in Korea

The reasons Korean women killed their children varied, but mostly paralleled those noted in the filicide literature. Korean women killed their children out of desperation (13%) or because the children themselves became a source of dispute between spouses (18.4%). Children also died during physical discipline and abuse.

However, 17 percent of the incidents involved the killing of children to hide evidence of behavior that violated the Confucian-influenced ethics of Korean society. The following case clearly illustrates this point.

Excerpt 2: Case# 03141957

Park B-H (age 30) died during the war [Korean War, 1950–53], and his wife, Lee C-O (age 31) was living as a widow with her in-laws. Park's cousin, Park H-D (age 30), was visiting his family home during leave from the army. During his visit, Lee and Park engaged in sexual relations and she gave birth to a baby girl. Fearing the judgement of others in the community, Lee wrapped the infant in a blanket after giving birth and buried it in the mountains, about 300 meters from the house. Children who were playing near the mountains discovered the dead baby and reported it to the police.

⁴⁹ Jisoo M. Kim, "From Jealousy to Violence," 95.

⁵⁰ Jisoo M. Kim, "From Jealousy to Violence," 107

Table 2: Putative motivation in South Korean maternal filicides

n=76	#	%
Lack of resource/life's difficulty	10	13.1
Child becomes a source of domestic discord/dispute	14	18.4
Domestic dispute	4	5.2
Hide evidence of illicit behavior	13	17.1
Extension of on-going abuse/discipline	7	9.2
Revenge against spouse	1	1.3
Financial gain	1	1.3
Mental illness	4	5.2
Trivial argument	2	2.6
Other	7	9.2
Unknown	13	17.1
		Total=100%

Shame in Korean society entailed a failure to meet the collective expectations of others⁵¹ which brought disrepute to the family.⁵² Hiding evidence of shameful behavior represented a significant motivation for filicide in the current study. Such cases involved married women having affairs with neighbors while their husbands were in prison or in the army and killing their children in order to cover up immoral acts that might bring disrepute to the family or result in divorce. Immoral actions included sexual behaviors that violated the harmony of the family. They occurred between stepfathers and stepdaughters, uncles and nieces, and stepmothers and adopted sons. Other illicit relationships occurred between married women and their husbands' kin, resulting in pregnancies that would have violated the principle of orderliness embedded in Confucian ideology.⁵³

There are several ways in which the cultural influence of Confucianism permeates the maternal filicide in Excerpt 2. First, the offender, Lee, was a widow who still lived in her late husband's home with his family. This practice was not unusual in that Confucian kinship relations involved a chaste widow playing the role of a devoted daughter-in-law.⁵⁴ Her sexual relationship with another man violated her duties as a pious daughter-in-law. However, a

⁵¹ Zuk-Nae Lee, "Korean Culture and Sense of Shame," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 36, no. 2 (1999): 181-94.

⁵² Sungeun Yang and Paul C. Rosenblatt, "Shame in Korean Families," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 32, no. 3 (2001): 361-75.

⁵³ Kim and Park, "Confucianism and Family Values," 232.

⁵⁴ Nancy Abelmann, "Narrating Selfhood and Personality in South Korea: Women and Social Mobility," *American Ethnologist* 24, no. 4 (1997): 792.

caveat is necessary here, as some studies have shown that widows were particularly vulnerable to sexual aggression from male members of their deceased husband's family.⁵⁵ Consequently, it is possible that such men sexually exploited these women, occasionally leading to scandalous pregnancies.

Second, chaste widows in Korea were recognized by the state as the apogee of Confucian family virtue. If they remained chaste, they were given land, housing, or rice, and their sons were promoted to civil servants. Widows who committed suicide rather than remarry were accorded the highest honor by the state.⁵⁶ However, sexual relations with another man violated the duties of a chaste widow. Finally, the offender in Excerpt 2 did not kill in revenge, but to hide the evidence of her immorality and shame—judgement of others in the community. This omnipresent gaze and judgement of others in the community was a unique aspect of Confucianism that led to shame and facilitated maternal filicides in Korea.

Weapons used

There were numerous ways that mothers killed their children. Almost 60 percent of the weapons that Korean mothers used to kill their offspring involved close physical contact with the victims. The most common way that mothers killed their children involved the use of poison.

Table 3: Weapons used in South Korean maternal filicides

n=76	#	%
Knife	5	6.5
Axe	1	1.3
Hands & feet	4	5.3
Poison	15	19.8
Drowning	11	14.5
Multiple weapons	2	2.6
Strangulation/asphyxiation	9	11.8
Other	12	15.8
unknown	17	22.4
		Total=100%

⁵⁵ Balsoy, "Infanticide in Nineteenth Century Ottoman Society," 983.

⁵⁶ Jungwon Kim, "'You Must Avenge on My Behalf': Widow Chastity and Honour in Nineteenth-Century Korea," *Gender and History* 26, no. 1 (2014): 135-136.

Consider the following case:

Excerpt 3: case# 04201959

Police in North Gyeongsang Province reported that wife of Kwon, J-J, Kim, O-N (age 26) was arrested for murder. According to the police investigation, Kim fed In, C-H (age 4) fried corn that was mixed with rat poison. The victim was the son of Kwon's second wife.

Poisons such as pesticides, cyanide, and lye were commonly available in rural Korean households which were used for agricultural purposes. Women primarily resorted to this weapon. The administration of poison, however, required action that necessitated the performance of gender roles. As can be seen in excerpt 3, Kim prepares the food; Korean households relegated this task to women, and Kim's presence in the kitchen reflects this gendered distribution of domestic labor. Moreover, poison was rarely administered on its own. Rather, it was mixed with other substances such as food to hide their noxious smell and taste. Women, rather than men, were equipped with the cultural skills to be able to accomplish this task. Kim prepares the food, mixes it with poison, and feeds it to the victim, thereby enacting her gendered role as a caretaker in the family.

The means that women used were quite different compared to those of men. Korean women used edged instruments such as knives and axes in only about 8 percent of the killings. Men, however, used ordinary household tools in almost 40 percent of the filicides they committed. Although mothers sometimes used knives, axes, and strangulation, they primarily resorted to two methods: poisoning and drowning. Drowning, in fact, made up almost 15 percent of the cases, but men rarely used this method to kill their children. Men also rarely used methods that we coded as "other." However, women utilized "other" methods such as stuffing a newborn inside a drainage ditch, scalding it with a hot iron, or stuffing cotton inside an infant's mouth.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has examined the offense, the offender, and the characteristics of the victims of maternal filicides in Korea. Our findings parallel previous literature in that mothers in Korea killed their biological children in one-on-one contexts, using weapons that were commonly available and in contexts that were consistent with the gendered division of labor in the household. Korean mothers also killed as an extension of ongoing child abuse and as revenge against a spouse.⁵⁷ Moreover, the majority of Korean women who killed their offspring were

⁵⁷ Phillip J. Resnick, "Filicide in the United States," *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 58, no. S2 (2016): S203–09. Krischer et al., "Motives for Maternal Filicide," 191–200.

in their 20s and 30s, while the victims were under the age of 11. This finding corroborates previous work by Eke et al. which posits that a lack of resources and social support are primary factors in filicides.⁵⁸ These general characteristics of mothers who kill their children are consistent with findings from other national contexts reported in previous studies.

While mental illness has been established as a key risk factor for filicides,⁵⁹ the data in this study made it difficult to assess whether psychiatric disorders contributed to Korean mothers killing their offspring. We coded cases as being related to mental illness only when the newspaper reports mentioned it as a factor, but this was the case in just 5 percent of maternal filicides. This figure, however, almost certainly underestimates the prevalence of mental illness in filicide incidents. In the period under study, mental health services were woefully inadequate and a significant cultural stigma was attached to mental illness. However, the data do show that mothers and fathers killed their offspring because the victims themselves were suffering from mental illness. That is, people treated mental illness as if it were a physical illness, straining already resource-deprived families with the additional burden of caring for a mentally ill child. Consequently, mothers and fathers used murder as a way of solving the problem of deficient resources. Yet, our findings also diverge from the previous literature in ways that are distinctly influenced by Confucianism as the predominant cultural belief system in Korea.

Cultural structures and ideologies have seldom been examined directly in criminological scholarship. Criminological theories tend to focus on self-control and the neighborhood context of offenses and the bonds of offenders to social institutions.⁶⁰ However, using maternal filicides in Korea as a backdrop, our work extends the domain of criminological theory by illuminating the role that cultural structures play in limiting and expanding the scope of criminal behavior, as well as the vehicle by which agency is instantiated.⁶¹ In this regard, the presence of concubines in Korean households and the fact that their offspring were often the victims of filicide support the view that macro-level structures such as Confucian patrilocal marriage customs and practices represented a distinct cultural logic.⁶² We have argued that polygyny shaped the emergence of a diverse cast of characters that reflected Bourdieu's notion of "habitus."⁶³ We have argued that stepmothers as filicidal offenders noted in prior works hinge on an implicit assumption of primacy imputed to Western notion of nuclear families as the default form of family organization. This Eurocentric assumption of what constitutes a family excludes the presence of alternative family systems that are not based on the principle of monogamy and the nuclear family. We found that a small portion of maternal filicides reflected pseudo-marriage forms, where stepmother offenders were first

⁵⁸ Eke et al., "Maternal Filicide in Turkey," S147; Eriksson et al., "Maternal and Paternal Filicide," 17–30.

⁵⁹ Raymond et al., "Maternal Filicide and Mental Illness," 1818.

⁶⁰ Robert J. Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁶¹ Emirbayer and Mische, "What Is Agency?" 970.

⁶² Emirbayer, Mustafa. "Useful Durkheim," *Sociological Theory* 14, no. 2 (1996): 109–30.

⁶³ Wacquant, "A Concise Genealogy and Anatomy of Habitus," 64–72.

wives compelled to live with illegitimate second wives (concubines) and their offspring. This cultural practice persisted because Korean men brought them into households as an extension of sexual entitlements permitted under Confucian family structures.⁶⁴ The polygyny that was practiced in mid-twentieth century Korea thus shaped the appearance of a new class of offenders and victims.

The first (*ch'ŏ*) and second wives (*ch'ŏp*) who appeared as offenders in our data were qualitatively different from those defined in Western works as those who do not share a genetic relationship with their offspring.⁶⁵ Concubines (*ch'ŏp*) existed in Korean society as a marginalized “other” throughout Korean history, from the beginnings of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) and into the Third Republic (1962). They were unable to inherit property and were excluded from family registers, and their offspring were unable to participate in the civic affairs of the state.⁶⁶ These children disproportionately appeared as victims in our data. First wives, however, occupied a position of privilege relative to the concubines due to the Confucian emphasis on status and age. Concubines constituted a class of unrecognized and invisible women in blended families and multigenerational households in a patriarchal, Confucian-influenced society that practiced polygyny. Our findings suggest that the practice of taking second wives persisted into the mid-twentieth century in Korea, and their offspring bore the brunt of violence from first wives. This is one way that cultural structures facilitated violence within the Korean family.

The presence of concubines also exacerbated family conflicts. Jisoo M. Kim has examined court records from premodern Korea and argues that the presence of second wives created jealousy in the first wives that resulted in interpersonal conflicts which were resolved through violence directed at the second wives.⁶⁷ While other countries in East Asia gradually transitioned out of polygyny and the concubinage system due to the internal and ideological contradictions that such practices imposed,⁶⁸ our work illustrates that the vestiges of polygyny persisted into mid-twentieth century Korea even as it urbanized and industrialized, sowing domestic discord between wives, which was then directed against defenseless victims of already marginalized women.⁶⁹ Our finding that stepmother killers were often first wives bridges the sociological debate between structure and agency and shows that the violent acts of first wives were reactions against Korean ideological structures⁷⁰ that accorded privilege to

⁶⁴ Bryna Goodman, “‘A World of Concubines’: Fissures in the Category of ‘Woman’ in Republican China,” *Journal of Women’s History* 32, no. 1 (2020): 85–110.

⁶⁵ Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, “Crime and Conflict: Homicide in Evolutionary Psychological Perspective,” *Crime and Justice* 22 (1997): 51–100.

⁶⁶ Sun Joo Kim, “My Own Flesh and Blood,” 6.

⁶⁷ Jisoo M. Kim, “From Jealousy to Violence,” 91–110.

⁶⁸ Goodman, “‘A World of Concubines,’” 103; Matthew Gordon, “Unhappy Offspring? Concubines and Their Sons in Early Abbasid Society,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 1 (2017): 153.

⁶⁹ Jaffe et al., “Paternal Filicide in the Context of Domestic Violence,” 142–153.

⁷⁰ Michael Schudson, “How Culture Works: Perspectives from Media Studies on the Efficacy of Symbols,” *Theory and Society* 18, no. 2 (1989): 153–80.

men and their patriarchal excesses.⁷¹ Filicides carried out by first wives reflects this reaction against blended households, a family structure that fomented female jealousy. Moreover, polygyny created a subservient class of women from the lower classes—concubines—whose offspring tragically often became the victims in our data. The agency of the second wives was reflected in the mass killings of children followed by suicide.

Our study has also shown that Confucianism was a stable ideology that shaped the motivation and post-offense behaviors of offenders in maternal filicides in Korea. Contemporary criminological theories have conceptualized shame as a crime prevention tool that prevents potential offenders from carrying out the crime. Shame is produced through an internalization of external social controls; it is also compounded by gender roles that disproportionately affect women as objects of dependencies.⁷² Our work suggests that aspects of a culture that foreground a subject's inability to meet conventional moral standards can become stigmatizing factors that facilitate crime. Hiding evidence of illicit behavior was the second most common motivation in the maternal filicides we investigated. Offenders feared the gossip and judgement of their neighbors and others in the community. As a result, they attempted to cover up evidence of illicit behavior that violated the principles of harmony and self-restraint in the Confucian-influenced ethics of Korean society at the time. This shame was embodied in the post-offense behaviors of filicidal mothers, who covered their infants in bags, cloth, and blankets and then buried them.⁷³ This type of post-homicide behavior provided distance from the murder site, covered up the crime, and hid the evidence. This is a key thematic feature of shame in which killers attempt to mitigate by positioning them so as to avert their gaze.⁷⁴ Korean women attempted to cover up their extramarital affairs or incestuous sexual relations by killing their offspring and then hiding evidence of their illicit acts. These post-offense behaviors suggest concrete manifestations of cultural norms that facilitate social action in ways that reify the social structure of shame.⁷⁵

Another way in which culture permeated maternal filicides in Korea was in the weapons that were used in the offenses. Our findings indicate that the most common methods women used to kill their offspring were poisoning and 'other'. Ordinary household chemicals that were used for agricultural purposes were used as weapons; outhouses often appeared as scenes where the victims perished. Using poison to kill one's offspring or pushing them into outhouses reflected the rural character of Korean society circa 1950s. It is highly likely that the urbanization and industrialization that occurred in Korea since the 1960s may have led to changes in the weapons used in filicides. Outhouses have been replaced by indoor plumbing; most Koreans live in urban centers rather than in rural areas doing agricultural work. For

⁷¹ Elizabeth LaCouture, review of *Concubines in Court: Marriage and Monogamy in Twentieth-Century China*, by Lis Tran, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 3 (2016): 822–23.

⁷² Braithwaite, *Crime, Shame and Integration*, 14.

⁷³ Robert D. Keppel and Joseph G. Weis, "Time and Distance as Solvability Factors in Murder Cases," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 39, no. 2 (1994): 386–401.

⁷⁴ C. Gabrielle Salfati, "Offender Interaction with Victims in Homicide: A Multidimensional Analysis of Frequencies in Crime Scene Behaviors," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 18, no. 5 (2003): 501.

⁷⁵ Emirbayer and Mische, "What Is Agency?" 962–1023.

future works, an examination of weapons used in contemporary filicide cases may illuminate a broader view of cultural changes that have occurred in Korea and their effects on filicide when compared to the findings of the current paper.

Despite the contribution to the literature on filicide, our work has several limitations. We only used one source to study the offense. We were not able to validate the newspaper data with official sources due to the limitations placed on record access at the National Archives of Korea. Having access to official records would have strengthened our project in several ways. First, the use of official criminal justice records would have allowed us to verify the information contained in the newspaper. Second, access to official records would have enabled the construction of filicide rates so as to discern trends by year. Finally, our sample was not randomly selected; it was a convenience sample of newspaper articles about filicides. Therefore, it is entirely possible that we may have missed other incidents during initial case selection. Furthermore, generalizability may be limited by the non-random character of the data. These are notable shortcomings in the current work that warrant remedy in future works.

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