

Feminists in Democratization: A Comparison of Three Asian Countries

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Abstract: Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are three Asian countries that share historical connections and similar cultural contexts but have demonstrated different levels of achievement in gender equality. South Korea and Taiwan were once under Japanese colonization and experienced radical democratic transitions in the 1970s and 1980s. Both countries witnessed the rise of their women's movements during their democratic transitions. On the other hand, Japan became a democratic country after receiving a new constitution by the U.S. following its defeat in World War II. Japan experienced its women's movement earlier than South Korea and Taiwan because it did not undergo the political turmoil associated with the democratic transitions. However, in 2023, Japan had a lower ranking than South Korea and Taiwan on the Gender Inequality Index. Therefore, this research examines the relationship between democratic transition and women's movements in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan after World War II to understand whether the interaction between democratization and women's movements influences progress on gender equality. Various theories and assumptions have been developed to explain why women's movements can achieve better progress in some newly democratized countries while others struggle. However, previous research may not fully explain the cases of these three Asian countries due to cultural and political differences. With a careful examination of the democratization and women's movements in these three countries, we find that they heavily rely on the political power, networks, and strategies that feminist activists and women's groups acquired during the democratization process. Feminist activists in South Korea and Taiwan acquired political power, built networks, and developed strategies during their countries' democratic transitions, which helped them engage with the government in a new political environment after democratization. On the other hand, feminist activists and women's groups in Japan developed fewer resources and strategies to advance the women's movement since Japan did not undergo a radical democratic transition.

Keywords: Women's Movements, Democratization, State Feminism, Comparison Study, Asian Studies, Gender Studies

1. Introduction

South Korea and Taiwan were under Japan's colonization and were not liberated until Japan's defeat in World War II (hereafter WWII). Japan was given a new, democratic constitution by the U.S. in 1946 and established a democratic government in 1947. In contrast, Taiwan and South Korea began their democratic transitions in the 1980s and became consolidated in the 2000s.

The criterion for considering a democracy consolidated is Huntington's (1991) two-turnover test: a regime should experience two consecutive turnovers of power. South Korea and Taiwan passed the test in 2007 and 2008. Linz and Stepan (1996) argued that one criterion for considering a democratic regime consolidated is that everyone agrees that democracy is the only rule of the game and has no intention to overturn it. Although Japan did not pass the two-turnover test until 2009, it was considered a democratic regime from 1947 onward (Chang, 2009) since no parties or groups sought to overturn it.

In addition, these three countries share cultural similarities influenced by Confucianism. However, in the Gender Inequality Index (hereafter GII) 2023, South Korea ranked 105th, while Japan ranked 125th. Taiwan was not measured in the GII because it was not a member of the UN, but Taiwan independently assessed itself using GII criteria and reported being ranked 7th in 2021. How could South Korea and Taiwan achieve greater progress than Japan despite Japan's longer-standing democratic regime?

Previous literature has studied the relationship between women's movements and democratization in newly democratized countries in Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. While democratization can provide new political opportunities for women's movements (Jaquette, 1994), it can also fail women's movements by bringing back traditional gendered values (Rai, 1996; Jaquette, 1994). Further findings show that other factors, such as a cohesive value framework between democratic transition and feminist ideology, political contexts, political coalitions, or a transferable legacy of past women's activism, impact the interaction more critically (Viterna and Fallon, 2008).

Following the previous studies, this research examines Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan after WWII to explore whether the previous findings can explain their different achievements in gender equality.

2. Japan

The U.S. initiated Japan's democratization after WWII. After Japan's defeat in WWII, it was under Allied Occupation from 1945 to 1952. The new Constitution was promulgated in 1946 to replace the Meiji Constitution of 1889 and was enacted in 1947 (McNelly, 1987). The new Constitution formally transformed the Japanese Emperor into a political symbol and made Japan a democratic country. Nevertheless, Japan has experienced one-party dominance for more than sixty years. This "uncommon democracy" (Pempel, 1990) has successfully achieved high economic growth and fulfilled the protection of individual rights in Japan.

2.1 The Women's Movement

Japanese women's advocacy for legal rights began in 1886 (Kitahara, 2017). Japanese feminists believed that it was their hard work that made the new Constitution include the protection of women's rights (Uno, 2016; Pharr, 1987). The new Constitution abolished the household system (家制度/*ieseiido*, a system that only acknowledges males as the head of the household and the heir) and acknowledged women as individuals. However, although the new Constitution granted women their civil rights, women in society still suffered from the idea of the household system, discrimination, and bias in different aspects of their lives. The experience of the past women's movement before WWII did not help feminist activists progress in a new political environment. The women's movement did not gain power until the economic boom in the 1960s.

Two factors influenced Japanese feminists' fights against patriarchy: rapid economic growth and pressure from the international community. Japan experienced an economic boom in the 1960s. During this period, women focused more on their "traditional roles," such as the "Mothers' Movement," which emphasized advocating for their children's well-being (Itou, 1987). However, in the 1970s, many women entered the workforce because of the labor demands resulting from rapid economic growth. Women then gradually moved their attention to their rights in the workplace and financial area. (Itou, 1987; 2011).

The international endeavor to promote women's rights contributed to the rise of the women's movement in Japan. For instance, in 1975, the Japanese government set up the Prime Minister's Secretariat Office for Gender Equality (婦人問題企画推進本部) as a response to the United Nations (UN) during International Women's Year (Iwamoto, 2007). In 1979, the UN announced the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which pressured the Japanese government to set up a specific institute for women's rights. In 1999, although the Japanese government did not ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention still pushed the Japanese government to ratify the Basic Act of Gender Equality Society (Japan NGO Network for CEDAW=JNN, 2003; Shinohara, 2008). To respond to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Japanese government finally developed the "Plan for Gender Equity 2000" (Natori, 2005).

In 1993, the long-standing one-party dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP, 自由民主党) collapsed. Simultaneously, the dropping marriage rate and the lowest birth rate (1.57 shock/1.57ショック; the number 1.57 was the lowest birth rate since 1966) shocked Japanese society (Cabinet Office N.D.) and raised political concern about women's rights and welfare. Rapid political changes created opportunities and opened policy windows (Iwamoto, 2007). For instance, the Prime Minister's Secretariat Office for Gender Equality (婦人問題企画推進本部) was reformed into the Cabinet Gender Equality Bureau (男女共同参画室) in 1994 (Bandou, 2004). In 1999, the Japanese Diet (Japanese parliament) passed the Basic Act for a Gender Equal Society (男女共同参画社会基本法). In 2001, the Cabinet Gender Equality Bureau (男女共同参画室) was reformed into the Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office (内閣府男女共同参画局).

2.2 Women and State

It is difficult to conclude that Japanese feminists have an impact on the Japanese government. In Japan, the set-up and reorganization processes of women's policy agencies were completely top-down, and women's groups and feminist activists seemed to play little role in the processes. Although Kobayashi (2004) argued that "state feminism" is applicable in Japan since, traditionally, Japan is a country with a strong government and a weak society. However, the Japanese bureaucracy's strong control over policy-making processes and policy agendas (Pharr, 1987; Osawa, 2005) also turns off the women's policy agencies (Gelb, 2003).

In addition, the strong bureaucracy not only jeopardizes the collaboration between feminist activists and the women's policy agency but also challenges the development of women's groups. The Japanese government would coopt feminist activists who support its policies into the women's policy agencies, cherry-picking women's groups with richer resources and pro-government stances for funding while leaving off grassroots groups or women's groups that challenge existing values. The government filters, picks, and cultivates women's groups and activists that will support them (Murase, 2006). On the other hand, the lingering argument about women's identities also impedes the development of women's groups. The ongoing dispute about women's roles as good wives and mothers has been so entrenched in Japanese society that it has challenged women's movements occasionally. In addition, feminist activists in Japan were long divided into housewife activists and feminist activists. They have some common ground but also hold different stances on policies (Boling, 2008). The Japanese government has also exploited this ideological division to coopt women's groups (Murase, 2006).

3. South Korea

3.1 Democratization

In 1953, South Korea set up the first assembly and came out with the Constitution, which claimed South Korea should be a democratic country. However, the new Constitution did not help to establish the newborn democracy in South Korea. The checks-and-balances system malfunctioned, and the elected presidents continuously expanded their power. Ultimately, the endless maximization of power finally led to the authoritarian regime. In 1972, President Park Chung-hee (박정희) declared martial law, and people were then under military dictatorship (Kuo, 2011).

In the late 1970s, the labor movement greatly challenged the dictatorship because the dictatorship continuously suppressed the working class to maintain social order and economic growth. In 1979, more than one thousand five hundred labor-protest incidents occurred within one year (Chu, 2011). The tension between the dictatorship and the people led to the worst situation: assassination.

3.2 Gwangju Uprising

In October 1979, President Park Chung-hee was assassinated. The power vacuum left by President Park's death brought chaos and uncertainty. The military man Chun Doo-hwan(전두환) later took power and became president after Park Chung-hee's death. While the South Korean people hoped for democratization after Park Chung-hee's death, the new president rejected it. People took to the streets to show their anger, and Chun chose to respond with military repression.

In 1980, numerous furious students and citizens in Gwangju marched onto the streets but ended up being killed by the military troops. This bloody uprising was named the "Gwangju Uprising." The Gwangju Uprising was one of the most pivotal events in the history of South Korea because of the high death toll and the government's suppression of victims' families and media (Chu, 2011).

The Gwangju Uprising sparked tremendous fear and anger towards the government among the South Korean people. People's fear of the government cemented Chun Doo-hwan's dictatorship, but the anger raised by the bloody Gwangju Uprising did not fade away.

In 1987, Chun Doo-hwan failed to suppress people's strong resistance against the government and was forced to reopen the presidential election (Kuo, 2011). In the same year, Roh Tae-woo (노태우) won the presidential election and became the new president of South Korea. Roh Tae-woo promised democratization in the speech "Special Declaration for Grand National Harmony and Progress Towards a Great Nation" (June 29 Declaration). Finally, the South Korean people gained their democracy back into their hands and built the Sixth Republic.

3.3 Women's Movement

The women's movement in South Korea moved slowly because of the dictatorship. In the 1980s, it was still hard to say that the women's movement had started because fighting against the dictatorship was prioritized among all the social movements (Cho 1988/2002). The year 1987 marks the turning point of the women's movement.

Before 1987, the women's movement was marginalized by other civil movements since fighting against the dictatorship took priority among all kinds of civil movements. After 1987, the women's movement bloomed

because of President Roh Tae-woo's (노태우) promise of democratization. At the time, feminist thoughts were widely spread on college campuses (Cho 1988/2002). Women activists formed groups to support civil and labor movements (Haruki 2006). College students believed they needed to become "laborers" to support the labor movement. While female college students left college to work in firms, they also combined laborers' resistance against the government with fighting for women's rights. Women's issues gradually caught people's attention. In 1990, the women's movement started advocating for gender equality.

The external pressure from the international community also played a critical role in pushing the government to improve women's rights. In 1983, the South Korean government was forced to react to the United Nation's (UN) call for a "Decade for Women" and set up the first women's agency, the Korean Women's Development Institute (한국여성개발원/ KWDI). The Korean Women's Development Institute was renamed the "Korean Women's Policy Institute" in 2007. In 1995, the government ratified the Women's Development Act to respond to the GM initiative and Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which were promoted at the UN 4th Conference. The Women's Development Act was renamed the Gender Equality Act to expand its scope from protecting women's rights to the fight against gender discrimination in 2015 (Lee, 2015).

3.4 Women and State

The continuous protests against the government in the 1980s eventually led to the formation of a new coalition of women's groups: Korean Women's Associations United (한국여성단체연합/KWAU). The KWAU is made up of women's groups that thrived during the 1980s, which were liberal-oriented and strongly advocated for women's rights. In contrast, another existing league of women's groups, the Korean National Council of Women (한국여성단체협의회/KNCW) was formed in the 1950s and held rather conservative political positions and a mild stance on women's welfare. It survived authoritarianism because of its conservative stance on politics and women's welfare. Though these two leagues are at opposite ends of the political spectrum and support opposite political parties, they regularly cooperate on women's policies. Their cooperation has proven effective since their opposing political stances ensured that one of them is always close to the party in charge. One example of their cooperation is overturning the longstanding household head system (호주/Hoju, the household system addresses that a household must have a "head," and the "head" should be a man.) in 2005. (Huang, 2022)

4. Taiwan

4.1 Democratization

Taiwan was under the colonization of Japan from 1895 to 1945 and was not liberated until the end of WWII. After WWII, Taiwan came under the Republic of China's (ROC) governance. Nonetheless, the Kuomintang administration (KMT administration) of the ROC was soon involved in the civil war against the Communist Party in mainland China and imposed martial law in 1948.

In 1949, the KMT administration was defeated by the Communist Party in the Chinese Civil War and fled to Taiwan to continue its governance. After its retreat, the KMT administration did not lift martial law in Taiwan. Martial law not only solidified the KMT's governance but also authorized the government to deploy military force to maintain social order (National Human Rights Museum, n.d.).

In Taiwan, democratization began in the 1970s, driven by the external and internal challenges that forced the KMT administration to change. In the international community, the KMT administration (ROC) lost its legitimacy as *China* to the People's Republic of China (PRC) and was evicted from the UN in 1972. Domestically, the economic boost in the 1960s empowered people to demand political rights (Shiau, 1990, 1991).

4.2 Formosa Incident

On December 10, 1979, to celebrate Human Rights Day, the Formosa magazine (美麗島雜誌) in Kaohsiung organized a parade, which was considered a rebellion against the government by the KMT administration. In the end, it was the pressure from the U.S. and Taiwanese citizens that stopped the KMT administration from executing arrested participants in the military court. The "Formosa Incident" created a consensus that democracy was in need. In 1986, activists formed the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the first political party other than the KMT in Taiwan under the ban on political parties. In 1987, the KMT abolished martial law and ended its

authoritarianism.

4.3 Feminist's Movement

The women's movement was first introduced to Taiwan in the 1960s and brought into the spotlight in the 1970s. Lu Hsiu-lien (呂秀蓮) led the newborn women's movement. Lu Hsiu-lien was first known for criticizing the government's limitation on female students' access to college to protect male students' educational rights. At the time, feminism was presented as an idea to make women better housewives by giving them more civil rights in order to avoid conflicts between feminism and traditional beliefs. In 1976, Lu Hsiu-lien set up "Pioneer Publishing" (拓荒者雜誌) to promote the idea of women's rights. (Gu, 2020)

However, the growing attention to the women's movement led to backlash from conventional society and suppression from the KMT administration. The financial challenge was the last straw that led Lu Hsiu-lien to close Pioneer Publishing. This frustration pushed Lu Hsiu-lien to leave Taiwan in 1977. When she returned, she recognized that women's rights could be improved only if the political system changed. Thus, Lu Hsiu-lien shifted her focus from the women's movement to the democratic movement. When Lu Hsiu-lien was sentenced to jail for participating in the Formosa Incident in 1979, another woman stood out to lead the women's movement in Taiwan.

In 1976, Lee Yuan-Chen (李元貞) participated in the human rights movement to fight the KMT administration, only to find that women were marginalized in those movements. Lee Yuan-Chen then recognized that the human rights movement would not improve women's status and that women's issues could be addressed through the women's movement. Therefore, Lee Yuan-Chen left the human rights movement and dedicated herself entirely to the women's movement. At the end of the 1970s, Lee Yuan-Chen became the leader of the women's movement after Lu Hsiu-lien's arrest. In 1982, Lee Yuan-Chen followed Lu's strategy and founded the "Awakening Magazine" (婦女新知雜誌社) as the center of activism for the "new" women's movement. The women's movement finally flourished in the 1990s, following Taiwan's democratization in 1987.

4.4 Women and State

After democratization, many feminist activists were invited to participate in policy-making processes because of their close ties with democratic activists. Lu Hsiu-lien (呂秀蓮) is a typical example. She was one of the founding members of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and was elected Vice President from 2000 to 2008.

In 1995, feminists supported the DPP's candidate, Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁), in the Taipei City mayoral election. After winning the election, Chen Shui-bian helped feminist activists establish a women's policy agency within the government (Gu 2020). Feminists gained more power to influence the government, especially when the DPP took power in 2000, which provided a good example of state feminism (Huang, 2015). Furthermore, feminist activists built a velvet network and also utilized it to advance women's policy agendas. The adoption of Gender Mainstreaming (GM) in 2005 was one of the achievements. However, since feminist activists' efforts have relied on cooperation and trust with the DPP, state feminism can be challenged when a party alternation occurs. When the KMT came to power again in 2008, state feminism was seriously challenged (Huang, 2015).

5. Comparison and Conclusion

5.1 Democratization in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan

Japan's democracy was considered "complete" with the implementation of the new Constitution. However, the legacy of the women's movement prior to WWII offered little support for feminist activists in the new political environment, and the civil movement did not thrive until the collapse of one-party dominance. In contrast, Taiwan and South Korea both fought hard for democracy and shared some similarities in their democratization. For instance, both countries had a "critical juncture" (the Formosa Incident in Taiwan and the Gwangju Uprising in South Korea) that helped to cement the path to democracy (Mahoney, 2001; Pierson, 2004). A minor difference was that Taiwan experienced a relatively more peaceful democratization process than South Korea.

5.2 Women's Movement in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan

The review revealed that women's movements in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan thrived due to economic

growth and pressure from the international community. Japan did not experience the chaos of democratic transitions, and there were fewer opportunities for feminist activists to seize power. The government and bureaucracy were, and still are, the primary drivers of gender equality policy agendas.

In contrast, South Korea and Taiwan developed their women's movements during democratization. Feminist activists faced political turmoil, but political and social changes also created opportunities for them to learn and develop networks and strategies. As a result, South Korea and Taiwan implemented state feminism and built women's policy agencies to continuously promulgate gender equality.

The significant differences between South Korea and Taiwan in the women's movement are international support and the operation of state feminism. Since South Korea remained a member of the international community while Taiwan did not, the South Korean government was forced to respond to international initiatives. At the same time, it relied on voluntary action by the government in Taiwan. When implementing state feminism, South Korea is less affected by party alternation, while state feminism in Taiwan can be easily challenged by party alternation.

6. Finding and Conclusion

Reviewing the interaction between democratization and women's movements in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan can provide important insights. Although Japan did not have a "democratic transition" after WWII, it still provides a good comparison to South Korea and Taiwan.

The comparison illustrates that democratization can benefit women's movements by helping feminist activists and women's groups acquire political power, accumulate energy, and develop strategies.

1. Acquiring political power: Women's groups and feminist activists gained power by fighting against the government. They built social trust and support networks during democratization. Their influence was later transformed into political power, which shaped policy agendas and processes after democratization. Women's groups and feminist activists also gained enough power to push the government to set up women's policy agencies.
2. Accumulating energy: Women's groups and feminist activists were forced to build networks and cooperation to resist government suppression. They established organizations to build their strength, sought cooperation with other civil groups, and developed coalitions.
3. Developing strategies: Women's groups and feminist activists developed strategies during their resistance against the government. They learned from the struggle to develop strategies for dealing with authoritarian and democratized governments. The development of state feminism in South Korea and Taiwan is a good example that reflects the lessons feminist activists learned during the movement and the intention to entrench their efforts within the government.

In contrast, the women's movement and feminist activists who did not experience radical political chaos and an urgent need for resistance had fewer incentives to struggle for power, form coalitions, and develop strategies. While democratization created chances to reset the power imbalance between the government and the people, feminist activists in Japan had fewer opportunities to break the status quo due to political stability. On the other hand, feminist activists and women's groups in Japan could not seize the opportunities to create bottom-up changes when party alternation created political changes. It still relies on women's groups and feminist activists' capability to leverage opportunities when political changes occur. Ultimately, state feminism in Japan remains government-controlled, with the government and bureaucracy dominating the policy agenda.

Therefore, the comparison between Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan shows that democratization can create an environment for women's groups and feminist activists to gain experience and develop strategies to influence the newly democratized regimes in the future. The power, networks, and strategies that women's groups and feminist activists developed during the radical transition could help them leverage political opportunities after democratic consolidation and achieve greater progress on gender equality.

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