

The *Ajumma* and Confucianism*

Bernard Rowan**

<요약문>

I argue that Confucianism is a progressive value system for the *ajumma*. Confucianism for the *ajumma* represents a framework to bridge the structures of liberalism and feminism. It also breaks with central concepts of neo-Confucianism, though it is typically misunderstood in doing so. The paper summarizes the life conditions of *ajumma* and employs survey data to show how the *ajumma* utilize Confucian categories in new ways.

Introduction

Though arguably unlikely candidates, the Korean women termed '*ajumma*' provide a window to the future of Confucianism as a moral and political tradition in Korea. The *ajumma* exemplify how working women respond to the structural constraints of contemporary life and act to reformulate globally and locally hegemonic structures.

Scholars of women's studies debate the relative polarity or congruence of liberalism and feminism¹⁾, while others discuss the trend of well-off Korean housewives to pursue consumer-oriented vectors of middle-class respectability.²⁾ There also are various studies of Korean women labor and political leaders

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** Chicago State University

1) See Kemp, 1994; Lorber (1998); Jaggar and Rothenberg (1993); Palley and Gelb (1994).

2) See Lett (1998) for a good overview of the lives of Korean middle-class housewives (*chubu*) and their culture; Moon (2003); Hart (2000); Chang (1997); and Jang and Merriam (2004) present some of the difficulties and attainments of *chubuin* adjusting their social roles in the contemporary context; Kim, Myung-hye (2001) discusses the political activism of Korean housewives.

and the crime of forced prostitution or comfort women during the period of Japanese colonialism.³⁾

However, much less attention has been paid to Korea's Confucian values as a potentially progressive resource for working women. This is not surprising, since many locate the very origin of contemporary Korean women's problems in the tradition of what is properly called neo-Confucianism.⁴⁾ On this view, the world forces of liberalism and feminism are discarding 'Confucianism' gradually-and fortunately.⁵⁾

Nonetheless, I will argue that the *ajumma* manifest a reevaluation of Korean Confucianism in their actions, and in their self-understanding. Their social identity breaks with central concepts of neo-Confucianism. As such, it identifies the contradictions of Korean neo-Confucianism and a progressive basis for Korean democratization from the perspective of working women.

Confucianism is not the only social philosophy of significance for working Korean women,⁶⁾ but I chose to examine the understandings of family, society, and politics represented by the *ajumma* I interviewed with respect to Confucianism. These understandings entail similarities and differences with the neo-Confucian tradition as well as with liberalism and feminism.

In the first section, I define the term '*ajumma*', discuss the *ajumma* as a social class, and describe their life conditions at home, in the workplace and in politics. In the second section, I elaborate a methodology of narrative social identity as the basis for presenting and interpreting data from surveys of the *ajumma*. In the third section, I develop an account of Confucianism distinct from its more popularly understood neo-Confucian appropriation. I specify how a three-part notion of family respect provides a more open-ended and non-gender-biased potentiality for Confucianism in practice; I then discuss how this interpretation of Confucian thought is reflected in the self-understanding of the *ajumma*. In the concluding section, I further motivate the argument that Confucianism is a progressive value system for the *ajumma* and make clear its distinction from neo-Confucian, liberalist, and feminist understandings. I describe how the *ajumma* are representative social characters in contemporary Korean society.

3) See Kim and Choi (1998) for a good overview of Korean feminism and for discussions of the comfort women and prostitution issues; Chang (1995) and Nam (2000) highlights the role of women in the pro-democracy movement; Shin (2001) treats the challenges for women and work during the 1998 economic crisis.

4) For representative discussions of women's subordination in traditional, neo-Confucian Korean society, see Eckert (1990), Deuchler (1992), Seoul Museum of History (2002), Han (2004), and Brannigan (2000).

5) See Kim, Hyun Mee (2001), Sung, 2003 and Kang, Hildi (2004) for examples of this point of view.

6) Notably, this paper does not consider Buddhism and Christianity as bases for social change. Neither does it deny that feminism and liberalism are rival bases for women's mobilization in Korea.

A Definition and Discussion of the *Ajumma* and their Life Conditions⁷⁾

The *ajumma* may be defined as Korean women between the ages of 30 and 60 who typically have the following attributes: first, they work for a living and in non-salaried jobs (temporary, part-time, daily, seasonal work); they work for low wages and without full benefits (pension, insurance, employment protections). Second, they have modest educational attainments and have not finished university.⁸⁾ Third, in terms of marital status, they may be married, separated, or divorced; they have children but cannot afford full-time childcare. Fourth, in terms of social class, they are not considered *samonim* (wealthy women) or *jungsangchung chubu* (middle-class women).⁹⁾ An *ajumma* is an adult woman with the dual burdens of work and family, basic education, and low social standing.

Traditionally, under Korea's neo-Confucian past and more recent authoritarian developmental society, *ajumma* depended upon their husbands for income, but for a variety of reasons, *ajumma* today work for a living, and in a growing number of cases as heads of household.

The term '*ajumma*' has since the 1980's gained a certain popularity and connotes women who are self-centered, devoted to their families, outspoken, and self-reliant.¹⁰⁾ As a cultural phenomenon, *ajumma* attract a mixture of criticism, respect, and forbearance from other Koreans. They exemplify the class and gender biases in contemporary Korean society as well as the way working women mediate social structures and forces to accomplish their interests (Kim, Seung-Kyung, 2002).

Today's *ajumma* are having fewer children¹¹⁾ later in life¹²⁾ and tend to criticize their spouses more openly. They are divorcing in greater numbers.¹³⁾ In turn, more *ajumma* today are heads of household.¹⁴⁾

7) This section has been updated from Rowan (2000). To provide a statistical picture of the lives of *ajumma* is not easy, since many Korean statistics in English are more generalized and speak of conditions for women as a whole, or by age, income, or some other related variable. However, what is written about Korean women applies to the *ajumma*, *other things equal*. In this section I have utilized statistics that comprise the *ajumma*, even if they are not generally specific to women of this definition or social class, and I have made every effort not to mistake the data's implications.

8) On the relationship of low-educational attainment, status as an *ajumma*, and returns to labor, see Monk-Turner (2004).

9) For a discussion of contemporary middle-class housewives, see Lett (1998)

10) See <http://www.liminality.org/archives/94/> for just one of many similar descriptions of the *ajumma* that are popularly available.

11) The total fertility rate in 2000 was 1.47, versus 1.6 in 1997 and 4.5 in 1970 (Korea National Statistical Office, 2002). This had led many to discuss a "baby strike" and to prognosticate reforms to maintain the Korean economic engine (Korea Herald, 2002).

12) More *ajumma* are having children in their thirties (the average age at marriage in 2001 was 26.8 compared to 23.4 in 1985), fewer *ajumma* are giving birth, and many women are delaying marriage (Korea National Statistical Office, 2002).

13) More Korean women are choosing to initiate divorce proceedings after 20 or more years of marriage; there has been a 100 percent increase over the last ten years, and women bring 80 percent of these actions (Byun, Eun-mi, 1999).

Less and less do they expect to rely on arrangements for senior women in traditional families, such as the opportunity to live with a son in later life.¹⁵⁾ Since Korean women tend to outlive Korean men,¹⁶⁾ the *ajumma* also anticipate living alone in later years.¹⁷⁾

Given these factors, it is not surprising that *ajumma* work. They do so in order to support their families, very often to pay for education-related expenses. Indeed, *ajumma* are working today in greater numbers and for a longer period of time. In 2000, 50 percent of women participated in economic activities; the rate was nearly 65 percent among women heads of household (Korea National Statistical Office, 2000).

Nonetheless, the wages for Korean women are over one-third less than are wages for men, and many of the *ajumma* work without healthcare, pension, or unemployment benefits.¹⁸⁾ When *ajumma* engage the job market, they find it an uninviting place.¹⁹⁾ They are among the last-hired and the first-fired and experience discrimination in terms of pay and promotion. *Ajumma* tend to work in part-time, daily, temporary, or seasonal occupations.²⁰⁾

A contributing factor to their work difficulties is the cost of full-time, in-home childcare which may run 300,000 won or more per month. Outside the home, less than one half of one percent of the national government budget is devoted to provision of childcare (Korean Women's Development Institute, 1999). Many *ajumma* cannot work as long as they need to do or must quit their jobs because of family obligations.

These life conditions for *ajumma* result in adverse health impacts, physical and mental. The number one cause of death for Korean women is muscle and vascular disease, then "diseases of unidentified symptoms"

The average age of women divorcing is 36.5 (Kim, Jae-ho, 1999).

- 14) In Korea, the number of single-member households has increased 35.4 percent over the past five years to 2.2 million (as of 2001). The number of female-headed households increased 23.6 percent to 2.653 million or 18.5 percent of all families (KOREA Now, 2001). 50.5 percent of these are widows, 21.4 percent are single, 16.1 percent are married, and 11.6 percent are divorced (Korea National Statistical Office, 2002).
- 15) In a May 2001 survey, 93.4 percent of single Korean women said they do not wish to live with their in-laws. 43.6 percent of men also said they wish to leave their parents (Korean Information Service, 2001).
- 16) The life expectancy for women is 80 versus 72.8 for males (Korean Information Service, 2003b).
- 17) As of 1999, 6.6 percent of all Korean women were 65 or older, which amounts to 3.05 million people. Of these, 19 percent or nearly 580,000 lived alone (Korean women's Development Institute, 1999a).
- 18) The wage ratio (men to women) in 2001 was 100 to 64.8, compared to 100:55 in 1990 and 100:61.5 in 1996 (Korean Information Service, 2001e).
- 19) The Roh government plans to increase the number of women working in state-owned businesses to 30 percent, up from the 2003 rate of 26 percent. The numbers for government positions in 2003 were 32.8 percent and 35.8 percent in the private sector. In state-run firms, 17.7 percent of female employees were regular workers; the rate in private companies was 34 percent (Korean Information Service, 2003a).
- 20) According to a 2002 report, 53.1 percent of women workers are temporary workers, and their hourly minimum wage is approximately \$1.05 (1200 won), which is near the bottom among OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries and around 30 percent of the average wage for salaried workers. Over 73 percent of women workers are irregular, and over 74 percent earn less than 500,000 won per month (*Women 21*, 2002).

(sic), and cancer (Park, Jung-eun, 1994). According to a 1996 report, two in ten women were undernourished. Among women aged 40 to 65, it is estimated that one in three are depressed (Jho, 2001; Park, Young Joo, 2002).

Despite the manifest need for labor market improvements and policies to facilitate their independent activities, Korean *ajumma* are not sufficiently organized. Only five percent of women workers belonged to unions as of May 1999 (Wong, 1999). Only five percent of managers were women as of 1997 (Chung, Hwa-Soo, 2000). Employers are adept at labor co-optation, substituting *agassi* (younger, unmarried women) for *ajumma* in some contexts (sales, office work, and consumer relations), while doing the opposite in other situations (manufacturing, hotels, simple labor).

This qualifies the structure of work for *ajumma* in the following way (Kim, Seung-Kyung, 2002; Won and Pascall, 2004): they tend to work before marriage (as *agassi*, or unmarried young women), stop during the years of childbirth, and then return sometime after the birth of their child(ren). Among other things, this pattern works against equal treatment, job advancement and retention --to say nothing of how persons who follow it are viewed by employers and colleagues or labor competitors.

The *ajumma* incur social discrimination from younger women in the workplace, as well as from male workers. Younger and upper-class women and men generally look down upon the *ajumma* as failed or non-virtuous women. This is because the *ajumma* may be said to deviate from traditional, neo-Confucian norms for women as well as contribute to labor competition (with other classes of workers), constituting a reserve supply of workers for employer substitution or addition in times of peak/slack demand (Kim, Seung-Kyung, 2002; Jang, 2004; Sung, 2003).

In terms of politics and government, Korean women generally, and *ajumma* in particular, are under-represented in the ranks of lawyers and elected officials, this despite the facts that the 2004 government elections saw 39 women win seats in the National Assembly and more women are pursuing legal training.²¹⁾ Divorce decisions rarely award adequate compensation to *ajumma*, whose housework is devalued in measuring a family's asset-generating stream under Korea's "separate calculation system".²²⁾

The political attitudes of *ajumma* are culturally conservative but changing. They are willing to criticize not only their husbands and fellow citizens but also the government, in particular about the importance of

21) See Lee and Kim (2000) and Chung (2000). Over half the electorate, but as of 2004 only 13 percent of the National Congress is composed of women (Hong, 2000). In a recent poll of younger Koreans, although 82 percent believed there were too few women politicians and 71 percent supported having more than 20 percent of Congress composed of women, only 59 percent were willing to vote for them (Kim, Chang-Kyun, 2000).

22) The labor of women in the home is estimated to equal fifteen percent of Korea's gross domestic product, around 72 trillion won, according to a recent estimate. The average 6.69 hours of work is valued at \$869 a month or \$10,649, which is roughly 13.6 million won per year (Korean Information Service, 2001c).

individual choice and control over life decisions. While most *ajumma* might prefer a spouse who is financially independent and capable of supporting them, they believe it is their responsibility to provide for children.²³⁾

The Roh administration has acted to liberalize the family-head or *hoju* system. Women may now register as legal heads of household, and children may adopt the surnames of their mothers (Korean Information Service, 2003). In addition, the Roh government implemented Maternity Protection Laws in 2001. Women employees must be extended 90 days paid maternity leave and an additional 45 days of unpaid leave; employers are to pay for 60 of the 90 days and the government the remaining thirty. However this law applies just to firms covered by state employment insurance, which accounts for only around 40 percent of employed women. Many *ajumma* are not covered by this legislation (Korean Information Service, 2001b; Won and Pascall, 2004).

To summarize, *ajumma* today must work outside the home to have any chance of accomplishing familial and personal financial needs. They do so, and yet their livelihoods are not secure. Many *ajumma* cannot work as long as they need to do, facing a lack of affordable childcare and associated family burdens. Many experience health problems. They are insufficiently organized and under-represented, and their attitudes reflect the contradiction between their life conditions and the prevalent gender norms of marriage and family life in Korea.

Having reviewed the literature to support the definition of *ajumma*, I now turn to consider survey evidence. In particular, the discussion will examine how the *ajumma* view their lives and the social and political implications of their struggles for meaning and security.

The *Ajumma* as Narrative Social Agents

What do the *ajumma* say? Next follows a presentation of data gained from survey interviews of Korean *ajumma* conducted in the Summer and Fall of 2002. Prior to presenting and discussing the data, I discuss the underlying methodology. The method I utilize proceeds from a theory of narrative social identity, and I rely in so doing upon the work of Abelmann (1997, 1997a), McAdams (2001) and Bamberg (1997).

23) A study of attitudes toward marriage found that women who were re-marrying had similar attitudes about men as *agassi* (young, unmarried women) in terms of the male as breadwinner, holder of a good job, and source of financial power (Lee, Mi-kyong, 1999).

Narrative Social Identity

Nancy Abelmann (1997) has conducted research in which subjective survey data is analyzed to interpret the connection between stated opinions of subjects and their representation of social meanings. Her work models personality as a construction between varying conceptions of character and selfhood (i.e. social narratives) that are current in the self-understandings of her subjects and their culture(s). It eschews any notion of selfhood as an invariant and fixed self external to social narratives.

In Abelmann's research on Korean women (1997, 1997a), her subjects posit differences (as well as similarities) with cultural value systems and ideologies, and in doing so represent claims to power as individuals. The stories and opinions of her interviewees carry meanings that reflect objective social understandings of life conditions and value constraints. They also reflect subjective re-appropriations and reformulations of dominant and anti-typical narratives as a basis for constituting personal identity and for accomplishing life interests. Abelmann's subjects are neither free of meta-narratives nor bound in any deterministic way to living under their authority.

Two other social theorists' contributions are of relevance to my account. McAdams (2001) understands selfhood as an internalized construction between and among different, potentially rival meta- or master narratives (e.g. neo-Confucianism, liberalism, and feminism). Interview subjects represent such meta-narratives in self-styled ways. Depending upon the currency and success of their appropriations, social agents can deconstruct and reconstruct existing, even globally or locally hegemonic, social narratives.

Second, Bamberg (1997) understands persons as organizing master narratives to express their interests and opinions. Persons are not independent and do not stand above narratives, but their agency represents an effort to re-work preexisting social narratives to accomplish coherent, fulfilling, and purposeful identity.

Bamberg's also theorizes selfhood as a process of identity formation coextensive with adult life. A particular individual may not have achieved or expressed a unified sense of self but nonetheless represents a basis for identity that borrows from and/or re-appropriates existing social understandings. The self is an artifact of a process of self-reflection in social context.

One advantage of Bamberg, McAdams and Abelmann's theories as a basis for surveys is that they require relatively few assumptions about identity beyond what the first person accounts of interview subjects represent (Thorne, 2004). In addition, their research (in particular Abelmann's) is not preoccupied with quantities of subjects or statistical n-size issues. The main purpose is to glean from careful and considered analysis of subjective data the correlation of responses with pre-existing accounts of a subject's social context, and the implications of those responses. In this kind of research, while more rather than less subjects are desirable, the validity of the research does not depend upon a large sample size.

Following these theorists, my method is to compare the subjective data obtained from *ajumma* with objective, literature-based descriptions of the subjects' living conditions, as well as with some of the main ideological or meta-narrative understandings in their culture (i.e. neo-Confucianism, liberalism, feminism). I then identify how the 'Confucianism' expressed in the opinions of the *ajumma* vis-à-vis their life conditions reflects differences with the 'neo-Confucian' meta-narrative of mainstream Korean culture, as well as with the competing meta-narratives of 'liberalism' and 'feminism'. The narrative social identity method I utilize²⁴⁾ understands identity as a product of the individual person's reworking of master narratives toward a more unified sense of self.

To anticipate, what I find is that the *ajumma* are a candidate to be among the representative characters of contemporary Korean culture. This is because their version of Confucianism is distinct from Korean neo-Confucianism and because the *ajumma* are reworking existing social narratives to accomplish a more unified sense of self and their life interests.

Survey Research of the *Ajumma*

A twenty question survey instrument was designed to inquire about three main areas: self-understanding, family relations, and public culture. The instrument is presented in Appendix I. Together with a Korean university student, the author conducted five interviews, which corresponded to nine participants. The surveys were conducted during the period June to September 2002. All respondents were interviewed at or near their places of work without any form of incentive, beyond explaining that the researcher was an American professor pursuing a study of the *ajumma* and their social understanding.

No demographic information was requested of the subjects, other than if they were *ajumma*. However, over the course of the interviews, the respondents provided much of this kind of information voluntarily. The *ajumma* I interviewed were in point of fact the operator of a snack stand in Anam-dong, a restaurant worker in Anam-dong, three janitors at Korea University, a newspaper stand operator in Pungnap-dong, and three *pachulbu* or temporary workers affiliated with the Seoul Myeongdong YWCA.²⁵⁾

The interviews lasted from fifteen to sixty minutes each, depending upon the respondent's speed of speaking and length of responses. After translation, the responses were examined as discussed above.

24) It goes without saying that a "life story" method of interview and analysis of interviews need not cover a subject's entire life.

25) While a lot has been written and researched about *ajumma* who are factory workers, my research focuses on *ajumma* who are part-time workers, *pachulbu* (temporary workers), domestic housekeepers, shopkeepers, and restaurant workers.

What the *Ajumma* Say

While this topic deserves fuller treatment (Rowan, 2002), among the data gathered, I wish to present the following: the self-description of *ajumma*, the role of *sijipsari* service to in-laws, the relationship of *ajumma* to their husbands, and the *ajumma* perspective on Korean Confucianism.

Most of the women I surveyed identified with the term *ajumma*. The following were adjectives the subjects associated with being an *ajumma*: "married", "old", "nothing special", "no position", "busy", "limited time", "mother", "stress-filled life" and "forgetful because of stress". Perhaps best stated is the comment of one respondent:

Ajumma could have been a convenient word to describe someone who does not have a suitable title to face the outside world. For example, women who teach school are called teachers, in the workplace maybe a worker. However, those without a title are referred to as *ajumma*. . .

An often-noted aspect of the colloquial understanding of *ajumma* is their self-centeredness and selfishness, so one of my questions probed this claim specifically. The subjects indicated on the contrary that "*ajumma* embody sacrifice for others", and that "they are not selfish because they work". One said that "*ajumma* may be selfish, but only in order to live better than do others." Another respondent said that she was neither selfish nor selfless, but that what *ajumma* do benefits themselves and others; another that her 'selfishness' is in order to sacrifice for her family. One subject opined that older *ajumma* (over thirty) sacrifice but not younger *ajumma*. Another discussed how she refrained from pressuring her husband in a time of family tragedy and financial difficulty.

One *ajumma* described herself as "*tuksuni*," which means warm-hearted but harsh, and as one who never tries to burden others. Another commented that *ajumma* are "*chimabaram*" or extreme in personality, but this characteristic arises out of concern for one's family.

In terms of the neo-Confucian idea of a wife's obligations to her in-laws, or what is called *sijipsari*,²⁶⁾ several subjects noted this pressure and duty. Specific comments were as follows:

- "Parents-in-law are also parents. It's not a good way to isolate these two relationships."
- "In order to ease pressure on the wives of their sons, "*ajumma* should go to work."
- "These days it's hard to live. So we can't (sic), should not lean on the sons. The parents of the wife need to live peacefully. So there should be some working places where we can work."

26) See below at footnote 30 for additional discussion of *sijipsari*. Deuchler(1992) says in speaking of women and marriage in the Chosun era: "The mother-in-law was the most important individual in the life of the young bride. . . The filial daughter-in-law strove to follow the mother-in-law's orders punctiliously. . ." (pp. 261-262). A neo-Confucian wife should tend to the needs not only of her husband, but also his family, before or rather as the needs of her own.

- "We need to see parents-in-law, but actually many Korean people are quite feudal (*sic*). We need to regard them as our ownparents. In actuality, most women regard their in-laws as their own parents. Men, however, are different. Not many regard their in-laws as their parents. I wish this would change. Just as some sons-in-law live with their parents-in-law, they should regard them as parents."
- "I married a man who has 11 brothers and sisters. Only a brother was married, but not the others. We all lived together. There were many people, and because of this it was hard to [achieve] harmony in the family. Even though it was a tough thing, I supported them until they took college exams. In this difficult situation, my husband neededto help me and gather all the family. However he didn't. Because of these problems, there were many troubles and everyone looked like an enemy to me. Because my husband was not on my side, it was difficult. So I cried a lot. . . However during the *sijipsari*, I learned many things and among those mostly I learned the wisdom of life. For example, [I learned] how to make meals and traditional treatments. I would like to say, a small family is better, but we can learn many things with people. When I face a challenge [now], I usually flashback [from] the hard time. And I get a power to overcome. My *sijipsari* experience equipped me with perseverance."

Sijipsari is accepted as a duty, and it was also most often noted in a way that reflects awareness of patriarchy.

In related fashion, several *ajumma* mentioned that the husband's authority as family head is problematic. At first in their marriage, said one subject, her husband was very caring, but over time his preeminence in the home worked against a mutual relationship. These responses were typical: "Korean men . . . think they are the greatest. It must be changed." "A man needs to lead wisely and treat the family with a warmer heart." "The custom of treating women as inferior to men still remains..." Others stressed that husbands should give emotional warmth and support. "One word can really help us." Several indicated that men should help out more around the home, a behavioral manifestation of emotional respect and regard.

The *ajumma* uniformly voiced that the woman's primary concern is to remain faithful to her husband and/or children. While a woman might prefer that her husband support her totally, most of the interviewees worked because the family requiredadditional income, and some because of a husband's illness, absence, or divorce. As one respondent indicated, ". . . 'the challenge' would be an economic problem in the family that we must face. Frankly there is no other way to solve the challenge than to get a job and work." Another said that life is ". . . frankly suffering . . . life is so hard. It's unfair . . . when we want to educate our children, we don't have much money. We just work hard and live."

The *ajumma* spoke about their difficulties in the workplace. As discussed above, *ajumma* tend to be situated in largely tertiary and part-time or irregular and seasonal occupations. There is segmentation of the

women's labor market between *agassi* and *ajumma*. Respondents mentioned both themes. Several explicitly noted that companies would not hire *ajumma*, but only young ladies "because [we] are too old or married . . . It's unfair." One respondent proffered that she was satisfied with her less-than-equal lot. She said that older women do the kinds of work and at the kinds of hours that younger women will not do. However, she also indicated (as a woman in her 50s) that a better national pension system is needed.

I also asked the subjects I interviewed if they felt Confucianism in Korea helped or hindered *ajumma*. The respondents acknowledged that Confucianism is a part of their lives:

- "I live under Confucianism. I don't think Confucianism helps us, but we can't ignore its influence. I am a believer in God, but I still cannot ignore the influence of Confucianism. Already it's in me and most Koreans, maybe everyone. Even though many things are influenced by the Western world and I'm a Christian, I can't deny Confucianism."
- "We should treat Confucianism as a reference point to improve the situation. It's hard to throw away; just try to improve into the situation of modern society."
- "Even though I have a husband and children, often I feel lonely. In my heart, if we just lean on my Lord, it really helps me. Although I have my family, husband and child, there are times when I am really lonely and in need of a shoulder to rely on. In that sense, I think religion helps, whether it [the religion] is Protestantism or Confucianism."
- "We [three subjects] are all Christians. The most difficult thing [about Confucianism] is the ancestor-worship ceremony. In Korean Confucianism, everyone has to do a ceremonial bow [on holidays] . . . However in Christianity, nobody is allowed to bow, so it brings a conflict between my family and me. . . Christianity gives us a peaceful mind, love and harmony. Anyway in Korean society, it's hard to ignore Confucianism. *Ajumma* need to act wisely to this conflict between the religions. Even if one is a Christian, she should not openly reject ancestral worship but participate for the sake of family harmony. This is the reality."

Most of the *ajumma* struggle with Confucianism, but they do not reject it, either from the point of view of religion or as a social ethic. They indicated by their answers to this and the other questions that Confucian values and practices circumscribe their lives. However, no respondent showed awareness of a difference between Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. In what follows, I shall develop the data as allowing a distinction between Korean neo-Confucianism and what I call the moreprogressive Confucianism of the *ajumma*.

Analysis

The findings of my research contrast with customary depictions of the agency of Korean working women, who often are seen to internalize less than consciously the values of traditions and society. What the *ajumma* represent is better stated as a form of "voice" that combines "loyalty" and "resistance", and one not seen as futile.

In the case of the *ajumma* I surveyed, their stated opinions do and do not verify typical depictions of *ajumma* as women bound to neo-Confucianism, and as women operating without freedom under capitalist, patriarchal, and authoritarian social and political structures. These bases for social constraints do form a significant part of their self-understandings, but like Abelmann's subjects (1997, 1997a), the women also represented other meanings and possibilities. Their lives are more complex and contain operative narrative elements not captured by the main social narratives of their culture. Specifically, they represent a form of Confucianism that is distinct from neo-Confucianism, liberalist and feminist perspectives.

While fuller analysis must await a presentation of both Confucius' teachings and their neo-Confucian appropriation in Korea, as well as a comparison with liberalism and feminism (in the concluding section), I wish to highlight the key elements of what I would call the 'progressive Confucianism of the *ajumma*' represented in the survey data just summarized:

1. Men are not the necessary or sufficient public actors for a family; women also are public actors. *Ajumma* may assume public occupations (in workplace and of society) to maintain family harmony and respect.
2. *Ajumma* should serve their children, husbands, and in-laws, but family members must regard their needs as mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law; their interests must also be respected and validated.
3. The women's sphere of responsibility is not reducible to the 'inner' realm of the household or service to their husband's family. Husbands should support *ajumma* in their lives as working women, not just or so much in financial terms, but also in emotional support and respect for their activities.
4. Women may draw attention to themselves through outspokenness and making claims on behalf of their families.
5. Confucianism is a value system that does not align with contemporary social structures to form a unitary whole representing nature. It is a social constraint and also a basis for *ajumma* to represent their differences with the status quo.

Before continuing the interpretation of how the *ajumma* represent a distinct appropriation of social narratives in contemporary Korean culture, the paper next turns to examine the historical reductionism of

Confucian ideas in neo-Confucianism. It presents the reduction of Confucianism to neo-Confucianism in Chosun Korea and the survival of the latter as a mainstream contemporary (mis-)understanding of Confucianism. This is an important distinction to clarify, since I am arguing that the Confucianism of the *ajumma* is not equivalent to (contemporary or traditional, Chosun era) neo-Confucianism.

Confucianism and Gender

In order to motivate my argument about the *ajumma* and Confucianism, I first discuss the neo-Confucian appropriation of Confucian ideas and the way neo-Confucianism extended gender inequality in Korean culture. Then I present what the Confucian classics say about women and family life. Thereafter, I offer an argument that the Confucian texts admit of more gender-positive potentials for women, this through a three-part conception of family respect based upon the Confucian texts. These steps are the basis for returning in the final section to specify further what I am calling the progressive Confucianism of the *ajumma*.

Confucianism vs. Neo-Confucianism

In Korea, Confucianism was the language for Korean political self-determination during the Three Kingdoms Period (300–700 A.D.). Scholar-elites were schooled in the Chinese classics as a basis for securing positions in royal government. Overtime, Confucian concepts were generalized into a tradition through families and family lineage groups (Cho, 1998). Notably, these concepts were not originally "anti-woman", since under the Yi Dynasty, family lineage was not tied to male patrimony. Daughters could inherit and hold property, perform religious ceremonies, and remarry, for example (Peterson, 1983).

However, the Chosun era (1392-1910) made rigid this initial understanding of Confucianism and gender relations such that contemporary Korea is much more indebted to and preoccupied with what is really 'neo-Confucianism' as the normal and privileged understanding of Confucianism (Deuchler, 1992; Seoul Museum of History, 2002; Han, 2004).

In Korean neo-Confucian tradition, social bonds are constructed as hierarchical with the priority being male to female, parent to child, and senior to junior persons.²⁷⁾ Passivity, behaviors of submission, and

27) Confucianism in Korea works through what Haejoang Cho has termed "familism", that is the central importance given family relationships as a model for all social and political relationships (Cho, 1998). Confucianism understands ethical behavior through the three bonds and five relations. The three bonds are those between males

isolation within the inner spaces of the household were considered normal for women into the 20th century (Deuchler, 1992; Li, 2000).

Within the bonds obtaining between men and women, the priority of males to females also tends to elevate the authority of the female as wife, mother, and keeper of the household.²⁸⁾ The Confucian woman traditionally occupied a space physically demarcated within the household (not unlike Western societies with parlors, kitchens, and other women's chambers). This was all conditional on the relationship with the husband's family, and since many Korean households were multi-generational, the woman's authority was often subservient to her mother-in-law (*sijipsari*) as well as husband.

The neo-Confucian understanding of women also emphasizes the bond between a mother and her children. Those of most importance are a mother's relationship with her sons and, in particular with the first son, since it is on his basis that a family and its entire ensemble of relations continues or ceases to exist over time.²⁹⁾

In related fashion, within the neo-Confucian paradigm, women are socialized not to view gender inequalities as a basis for making social claims (of themselves or of men). That is, they are not given the validity to express public demands in terms of gender injustice. Men and women are situated in different roles seen to arise from their physical or biological differences that are natural to and constitutive of their gender identity and that are foundational to the meaning and structure of family and social life.

Neo-Confucianism hardens the distinction in Confucian classics between the 'inner' and 'outer' spaces, as well as that between *yin* and *yang* (Yee, 2002; Tu, 2001). The social structures and ideological reductionism of neo-Confucianism organize a hierarchy of men to women as a form of gender essentialism inhering in nature itself.

To summarize, the neo-Confucian appropriation of Confucian texts and ideas extends the following ideas and behaviors:

1. Men are the primary public actors for a family; women are private actors.
2. A woman serves her husband, parents-in-law, and children, especially sons.
3. Female authority complements male authority as the basis for family harmony; the women's sphere of responsibility is the 'inner' realm of the household and family as opposed to the 'outer' realm of the public sphere.

and females, parents and children, and older and younger human beings. The five relations are the ideas of friendship, loyalty, distinction, order, and faith. These relations are articulated and represented through the three types of bonds (Brannigan, 2000).

28) The latter function, depending upon the individual and class circumstances, could be enlarged to wield quasi-public power, and in all societies, has often borne public consequences of the first order.

29) It is the traditional emphasis upon mother-son relations that also tends to create hardship for the wives of sons, or daughters-in-law, and in turn, for *ajumma*. This is the phenomenon of *myonuri sijipsari*. See Kim, M.H. (1996).

4. Women should not draw attention to themselves through outspokenness or making claims on behalf of their families.
5. Confucianism is a value system that aligns with contemporary social structures to form a unitary whole representing nature. It is a social constraint and is not a basis for *ajumma* to represent their differences with the status quo.

Confucian Texts on Women

When one turns to the writings of Confucius,³⁰ little is said about women on the surface. These passages are typical:

- "The ethic of the man of high breed has its origin in ordinary men and women..." (UP: II, 12, iv).
- "Union of affection with wife and children is like the sound of drums and lutes..." (UP: II, 15, ii)
- "Kung said: The parents are in harmony, their wills harmonize, do they not?"³¹ (UP: II, 15, iii)
- The relationship of husband and wife is said to be of high importance for the universe (UP: III, 20, viii).
- In discussing family life and the need to be sincere as opposed to following codes and rituals automatically, Confucius says "No girl ever yet studies breastfeeding in order to get married" (GD: IX, 3).
- Quoting the *Odes*, Confucius says:

Delicate as the peach-tree in blossom, the leaves abundant as grass-blades, fragile fair she goes to the house of her husband, the bride who will bring harmony to it as an altar raised on earth under heaven. (GD: IX, 6).

The Confucian texts do not highlight the role of women in accomplishing social order. They speak regularly of men, males, brothers, fathers, uncles, princes, and other male-gendered titles and roles.

However, a pedestrian reading of Confucius as suggesting the necessity for what I am calling a neo-Confucian understanding of gender has been criticized of late as not reflecting Confucius' intentions, and/or as only one possible reading of how to operationalize Confucius' ideas (Chan, 2000, 2003; Clark and Wang, 2004; Tu, 2001). In particular, some scholars read the Confucian texts as not requiring the submission of women or truncation of their authority (Yee, 2003).³²

30) My interpretation of the writings of Confucius draws on Ezra Pound's translation of three Confucian texts (Pound, 1951), the *Ta Hsio* or "Great Digest" (GD), the *Cheng Yung* or "Unwobbling Pivot"(UP), and *The Analects* (A).

31) Pound interprets this to mean that fecundity is a matter of harmony of wills at p. 129.

32) Chan (2000) finds that "gender hierarchy" is not essential to Confucianism and that it is even **invalid** for Confucian ethics. Likewise, Tu (2001) argues that under Confucianism, the family system can evolve to include more active conceptions of women, since family roles based on mutuality and reciprocity are central, as opposed to particular

In the same way, Chung-tae Keum (2000) has argued that Confucianism as a moral understanding may need to be separated from past social contexts. Confucianism may be read as not proscribing a role for women in economic, social, and political life, depending upon the needs of the family and its members. This is precisely the reading of Confucius I find active in the narrative social identity of the *ajumma*.

Confucianism Reformulated

While the typical Korean today may not consider him or herself to be 'Confucian', this conceit is belied by casual observation of mainstream cultural tendencies. It is encouraged by the regrettable but widespread equation of 'Confucianism' with neo-Confucianism. Today, many Koreans may eschew the notion that contemporary Korean society and culture are 'Confucian,' and they wish to misidentify the significance of this term variously with authoritarian, anti-liberal, patriarchal, Orientalist, or developmental paradigms. This is because they do not distinguish between Confucius' writings and neo-Confucianism.

Neo-Confucianism arguably is a reductionist, vulgar understanding of the Confucian philosophy and tradition, which nonetheless became the dominant ideology for public and private life during the Chosun era, and which has persisted to this day as a conservative basis for Korean culture.³³⁾ However, this typical perspective does not exhaust the meaning of Confucianism as a tradition, or its possibilities for women, among other social actors.

To begin with, the way that women fulfill their role duties, faithful to the Confucian relations or virtues, is contingent on the kind of bonds that are constructed between women and men (Wawrytko, 2000; Li, 2000). That is to say, the extent of women's social space and authority, the particular division of labor between men and women, and women's role within the household are not natural so much as contingent on the understanding and elaboration of gender and social relations.³⁴⁾

Careful reading of Korean history does not justify ascribing women's subordination or political mistreatment to Confucianism *per se*, as opposed to the way Confucian categories were (mis-)appropriated to construct political and social conventions (Zhan, 1996) under neo-Confucian forms of social order and related gender essentialist and hierarchical narratives and categories.³⁵⁾

instances of such roles.

33) For one example of the continued appeal to neo-Confucianism as a conservative political philosophy, see Rhee, 2004.

34) The error of reifying patriarchal readings of gender relations as essential or necessary to Confucianism as a tradition often turns on the interpreter's reading of the *yin/yang* and inner-outer or *nei/wai* distinctions. For one notable illustration of this tendency, see Kang (2004). I follow Chan (2001, 2000) who argues that these distinctions, and certainly the Chosun era elaboration of gender, are not absolute or necessary referents for the derivation of gender relations under Confucianism.

In the next section, I draw on passages from the Confucian classics to motivate a view of Confucian gender relations as more open-ended and as bearing progressive potential for women. I will wish to emphasize in turn that these interpretations also cohere with the kinds of responses given by the *ajumma* in my interviews.

I will focus on three concepts: the Confucian ideas of flexibility in bonds and mutual self-development as well as the injunction against scapegoating. The interpretation I adduce, rather than neo-Confucian nostrums, better represents the agency and opinions of the *ajumma* I surveyed.

The Confucian Idea of Family Respect

The Confucian concept of family comprises many related ideas, which include what might be termed the social bases or faces of family respect.³⁶⁾ I want to isolate three such ideas in particular: flexibility and adaptability, relational self-development, and the proscription of scapegoating. Taken together, these three ideas elaborate the meaning of Confucian family respect as self-reliance in harmony with others.

The first is moral flexibility and adaptability.³⁷⁾ Flexibility is an essential element of humanity and justice (A: IV: 10: i). Respect in families requires departure from rigidity or "rule-governed" attitudes: the good person is not absolutely given to or averse toward anything in particular (A: IV, 10, i).³⁸⁾

Flexibility in public and private settings may involve allowing public claims to be made by any family member, according to the needs of a family in context. When the needs of a family or an entire society are not being met by practice under a pre-existing understanding of social relations, the understanding and practice of the bond or relation should be evaluated and changed. Confucian respect entails flexible authority and flexibility on the part of all familial-social agents.

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- 35) One scholar puts it this way: "Just as sexist interpretations of democratic principles in ancient Athens denied women political rights, and racist interpretations of Christianity denied blacks brotherhood and sisterhood, sexist interpretations of *ren* [jen in Korean] and other core values of Confucianism may have been responsible for excluding women in ancient China. It does not, however, necessarily imply that the concept of *ren* itself is sexist." (Li, 2000).
- 36) According to Confucius, harmony in parental bonds, with all family members fulfilling their respective roles and duties, is what prepares joy within the family (UP: II, 15, ii-iii). The basis of family harmony is a fundamental respect for others (Chan, 2000 Tu, 2001). All members of a family must practice self-control and treat others with respect in order to prevent disunity (UP: II, 20, xii-xiii).
- 37) My argument here is indebted to Li (2000) who sees the emphasis of Confucian and Mencian texts on the use of judgment and character-building as more important than rote use of rules or norms with reference to the Confucian understanding of gender relations.
- 38) Confucius indicates that virtue occurs without the use of force in moral actions: "... a proper man is not absolutely bent on, or absolutely averse from anything in particular, he will be just" (A: IV, 10, i).

The second basis of family respect is relational self-development. Mutual concern for the integrity of one's family maintains the vitality of the family and animates the social bases of respect. Self-development for one person is bound up with the self-development of others. Family well-being implies relational self-development, and any one person's interests or concerns are never fully attainable apart from others in the context of family life (A: VI, 28, ii; XII, 24, i).

Relational self-development is further extended by Confucius as a model for citizenship and leadership. Indeed, "one humane family can harmonize a whole state" (GD: IX, 3). Self-development requires openness to change and to new understandings and interpretations.

A third basis of family respect is the prohibition on scapegoating. Scapegoating is the bane of respect (A: XV, 17, i). Confucius' proscription applies in two senses: to those who have authority and to those who do not.³⁹⁾ A person should not claim, either as an authority or as a person responding to another's authority, what one would not wish to have claimed of oneself.

More generally, persons in authority are told to respect those who may be persons of apparent or perceived secondary rank (GD: X, 1). It is right to extend the sphere of humanity or *jen* and to enlarge the understanding and practice of respect by extending deference to others. A person should not act arbitrarily or to the disregard of notions of flexibility and relational self-development, among other Confucian values, regardless of one's position in context as a (felt) superior or equal.

Confucius' teaching on scapegoating is directly relevant to the field of gender relations today, which are a contested space of claims to authority, to priority, or to equal treatment in public and private settings. Read properly, the injunction against scapegoating implies a teaching about equality, since one should not in context lean on or lead with differences of status or moral "trump" cards in normal associations so as not to cause others to "lose face" would perhaps render the notion as well.

Elsewhere, Confucius indicates that humane action is the proper response to a (would-be) author of scapegoating (A: XIV, 36, i-iii). The clear intent of this saying is to provide for openness to those who disagree with any and/or all orders or bonds that purport to extend harmony and humanity. The injunction against scapegoating creates "space" for justice to emerge, within and without shared constructions of social bonds and virtues or relations. It also suggests that the recipient of scapegoating generally should not respond in kind as opposed to seek the course that maintains respect and extends its related values.

The implication of this three-part notion of Confucian family respect is a general and particular valuation of contingency and openness. The requirements of family harmony entail change when what has obtained

39) "If you hate something in your superiors, do not practice it on those below you; if you hate a thing in those below you, do not do it when working for those over you. If you hate something in the man ahead of you, do not do it to the fellow who follows you; if a thing annoy you from the man at your heels, do not push it at the man in front of you" (GD: X, 2).

in terms of the family's operation no longer enables fulfillment of family responsibilities. Confucius' valuation of flexibility and mutual self-development, as well as the proscription of scapegoating, together indicate that human relationships, including those based upon marriage and gender, are not to be reduced to a rigid interpretation of roles, expectations, and interests.

Application of Family Respect Conception to *Ajumma*

The *ajumma* I surveyed, and those discussed in social science literature, contest and re-appropriate dominant narratives that inform their lives (such as neo-Confucianism). Their representation of social order is not equivalent to the structures of neo-Confucianism. In particular, their lives within given social and political structures do not indicate mere or passive acceptance of neo-Confucianism. In turn, capitalism, neo-Confucianism, and patriarchy do not exhaust the identity of *ajumma*, including their understanding of Confucianism. And liberalism and feminism do not exhaust the available counter-narratives for social change.

Applying the methodology of narrative social identity (*supra*, p. 9), the survey responses of *ajumma* represent a practice of Confucianism that is not identical to the elements of neo-Confucian tradition. Specifically, when we compare the Confucian concept of family respect with the neo-Confucian specification of roles, duties, and interests (*supra*, p. 20) and then again with the survey data of *ajumma* as to the same (*supra*, p. 17), there is a striking discontinuity. The neo-Confucian schema does **not** provide for flexibility, relational self-development, or the prohibition on scapegoating as well as does that specification of Confucian relations reflected in the responses of *ajumma*. The neo-Confucian schema also does not reflect well and fully the way the *ajumma* really live, either by their accounts or by those of social science literature descriptions of their life conditions.

The *ajumma* I interviewed reflect the following progressive adaptation of Confucian ideas. In parentheses are the ideas of Confucian family respect present in *ajumma* self-understanding and behavior:

- Less focus on social status and more on maintaining associations or bonds with family members and others in society (relational self-development)
- Awareness that family needs require others to change but also that they require *ajumma* to change themselves (relational self-development; flexibility)
- Awareness that the neo-Confucian tradition has been a source of hardship for women but acceptance of Confucianism as a part of their lives and a basis for their action (flexibility, avoidance of scapegoating)
- Not relying on macro-political change as opposed to a perceived necessity for personal action (flexibility, relational self-development, avoidance of scapegoating)

More specifically, the responses of the *ajumma* imply first of all that *ajumma* who work in public and make claims on the public's attention in various ways are appealing to the notion of flexibility in moral relations, with respect to their husbands and family members,⁴⁰⁾ to employers, and to government leaders, among others. If it is often necessary for *ajumma* to act in ways that neo-Confucian narratives tended to reserve for men, for *ajumma* to work in service of family harmony for example, then women may initiate and make public claims, and expect that they be respected. This reflects a Confucian use of the notion of flexibility in familial and social relationships.

Second, to be effective workers and productive family members, *ajumma* require the kinds of work protections, supports, and benefits that other workers seek. These include health and pension benefits, attention to childcare and transportation needs, community supports for education, job skills development, and political recognition and representation. This acknowledgement of the self-development of *ajumma* need not be tied to a (Western) notion of individualism as opposed to the needs working women face in order to fulfill their family responsibilities (i.e. a progressive version of Confucianism). That is, their concern is with relational self-development.

Third, family respect prohibits scapegoating. The *ajumma* do not scapegoat the wider society as much as act within their power and abilities to accomplish their interests. While they have what many would term "complaints" about work, life, their husbands, the government, employers, and others, these verbalizations are generally moral appeals for understanding (to extend flexibility, relational self-development, and to avoid scapegoating) that do not reflect negatively on the behavior of *ajumma* at all. In the end, the *ajumma* by their actions speak louder than by their words, and those actions avoid scapegoating.

A neo-Confucian understanding of Confucian social relations and bonds does not (simply) obtain when women work outside the household and make claims of others, when they question and critically react to their obligations to husbands and in-laws, when they consider the value and import of their social obligations and duties, and when they comment on the economic and political dimensions of their lives. The *ajumma* I surveyed indicate that they are appropriating past understandings in new ways. They may not say they are Confucian women, but their opinions and behavior reflect Confucianism with a more democratic face.

The *Ajumma* and Confucianism

In this concluding section, I further motivate the argument that the *ajumma* represent a

40) For an interesting treatment of how the relationship between Korean mothers and children is changing as a result of contemporary trends, see (Kim and Hoppe-Graff, 2001).

progressive understanding of Confucianism. To do so, I first distinguish between the understanding of Confucianism represented by the *ajumma* and the liberalist and feminist perspectives. I then conclude with a discussion of *ajumma* as representative characters of contemporary Korean culture and society.

Ajumma and Progressive Confucianism Distinguished

The responses of *ajumma* to the survey questions problematize conventional and customary depictions of Korean women, in particular working women, as circumscribed and determined by the contours of Korean neo-Confucianism, liberalism, and capitalism. While their responses indicate the relevance of these meta-narratives, any reduction of the personhood and behavior of *ajumma* to their contours is not only unwarranted; it also is disingenuous. The identity of *ajumma* reflected in the data I collected demonstrates at minimum the existence of a progressive form of Confucianism in the culture of working Korean women, one that is more akin to the interpretation of the Confucian model of family respect just offered.

The neo-Confucian paradigm sees women as complementary social agents to men. They obey their husbands and serve their sons and in-laws. Women should not work in public or act for their interests. Since the previous section detailed the difference between neo-Confucianism and what the *ajumma* represent as to Confucianism, I will focus here on some of the differences with liberalism and feminism.

The liberalist paradigm sees women, like men, as individuals first and foremost. They should organize collectively as a faction or interest group to articulate and accomplish their interests. Liberals accept the capitalist social economy and seek to maximize the interests of individuals and groups therein. Women should pursue interests publicly and occupy public roles in the process.

Feminists see male domination of public and private spheres as the primary barrier to equality and freedom. They suggest that complementarity of women to men is the central sign of a patriarchal order, and that neo-Confucian and liberalist social orders, among others, tend to place men before women both as public actors and as individual claimants of interests.

The respondents to my survey saw women and men to be actors or agents in the public and private spheres. It is acceptable and appropriate for women to make social and public claims, but they do so not primarily as individuals (contrary to liberalism) but in order to accomplish their interests as (co-)authors of family.

The *ajumma* do not wish to jettison their responsibilities as mothers or wives or claim that gender is the essential problem in society, as opposed to seeking context-specific adjustments to the way particular instantiations of gender relations are a barrier to family harmony and relational self-development (unlike

feminism). They believe that reasonable adjustments to the gender division of labor can create space for relational self-development and emphasize the importance of flexibility in family and social relations.

Women do concern themselves with their sons and with the needs of their husband's families, but these interests hold no absolute priority. The *ajumma* I surveyed did not reject the duties of *sijipsari* as much as recast them as sub-categories of a more general social ethic of service to family harmony. They asked variously that in-laws be more understanding, or that the service of husbands to their in-laws and parents also be considered. This appeal to notions of ethical flexibility and relational self-development is neither liberalist nor feminist, and it is also not identical to the neo-Confucian stress on the service of wives to husbands, in-laws, and first sons.

The *ajumma* do not then identify themselves as mere complements to men. While my respondents do not claim the status of liberal autonomous subjects or feminists, they do claim the necessity to act in public for the sake of their families and themselves in turn. Their authority may be equal to or substitute for the authority of other family members, including males, husbands, and sons, depending upon context.

In terms of work, the *ajumma* agree with liberals and feminists that men and the general public should facilitate the needs of women who work. These assistances may include understanding and toleration, support for childcare or other work-related public policies, acceptance of the woman's need to be away from the household, and basic encouragement in the performance of their duties. They also would include social and legal action against employers who discriminate and abuse *ajumma*.

Unlike both liberal and feminist perspectives, however, the *ajumma* do not emphasize political action, organization, and collectivism as bases for public power and means for the accomplishment of private interests, or of separating their interests from those of men.⁴¹⁾ The *ajumma* stress a relational paradigm for redressing imbalances of public and private claims, justice, and the needs of persons. This would appear to be conservative and supportive of male privilege within the paradigms of liberalism and feminism (not to mention neo-Confucianism), but arguably both of those ideologies rest on assumptions about individualism and the relationship of women and men that are not shared by the *ajumma*.

The *ajumma* may be seen as new bearers of a Confucian idea of public activity for the family, and of the extension of self-development through work in society for the betterment of the family. They appeal to the ideas of flexibility and mutual respect in social receptions of their claims, based upon the merit of their work

41) The *ajumma* might be said to appeal to a "Confucian welfare state" model of social change wherein families and the community respond to citizens in need instead of relying on the government (Sung, 2003). However, unlike Sung, I do not see the *ajumma* as looking to "non-state agencies" any more or less than to their fellow citizens, co-workers, employers, husbands, in-laws, etc. as persons with whom they instance private and public relationships in terms of accomplishing social and personal progress. I would not in turn call their version of politics a "welfare state" model.

and the rejection of scapegoating as a response to hardship.

Ajumma as Representative Characters in Contemporary Korea

This paper has conceptualized *ajumma* in the way that Alasdair MacIntyre discusses representative characters in *After Virtue* (MacIntyre, 1981). A representative character is an ethical agent whose behavior highlights the meaning and possibilities of a tradition. Characters typify the central practices and settings of a tradition's typical or normal existence, as well as highlight their limitations and parameters for change. A representative character also exhibits virtues or qualities that enable those within a tradition (and those observing it) to understand it, its possibilities and limitations. Likewise, the issues or dilemmas associated with a representative character's social image provide a mirror for identifying the challenges needing attention in order to extend the tradition's practices, settings, and narrative self-understandings.

Ajumma are representative characters of contemporary Korean society with respect to Confucianism. They are not the only or exclusively representative characters, but they are noticeable in public life and the topic of frequent discussion and commentary, popular and otherwise. What describes their lives has meaning and importance for Korean society.⁴²⁾

How exactly does one describe their "representativeness", as it were? *Ajumma* are responsible for the care of family members inside the household, in particular for the education of their children; many perform significant duties to their in-laws. *Ajumma* perform the equivalent of two to three full-time jobs, and in so doing mediate between traditional and contemporary understandings of womanhood, of family, and of the individual.

Ajumma represent for Korea, perhaps unwittingly, the vectors of democratic contingency and possibility. More specifically, in their dual burdens of work and homelife, the *ajumma* mark a bridge between liberalism, feminism, and Korean Confucianism. As we have seen, their social identity reformulates what might be termed the narratives of the 'good Korean wife' in neo-Confucianism, the good citizen who works for and supports the Korean economy and government, and the liberalist and feminist social agents concerned with self-styled interests and freedom.

They represent Korean culture between a past that presupposed authoritarian government and traditional gender relations and a future the contours of which have to be reconstructed rather than merely received. Likewise, they form one site for conservative, reactionary, and traditional resistance to social change, on the one hand, and progressive reformulation of social relations on the other.

42) Just as MacIntyre's discussion of naval officers, Jane Austen, and England or Soren Kierkegaard and the Enlightenment are meant to describe critical representative persons and moments of other cultures, *ajumma* are central agents of Korean culture. They situate a window for analyzing the possibilities for Korean social progress.

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Appendix I

1. Are you an *ajumma*?
당신은 아줌마 입니까?
2. Give three words to describe an *ajumma*:
아줌마를 묘사할 수 있는 단어 3개를 나열해 주세요.
3. Why are you (not) a? b? c? (i.e. the three words)
당신은 아줌마를 묘사한 위의 단어에 해당됩니까? 해당된다면 왜 그렇고 해당되지 않는다면 왜 그렇지 않다고 생각합니까?
 - a. 해당된다/되지 않는다. 이유?
 - b. 해당된다/되지 않는다. 이유?
 - c. 해당된다/되지 않는다. 이유?
4. Are *ajumma* self-centered? Why (not)?
아줌마는 이기적입니까? 왜 그렇습니까? 왜 그렇지 않습니까?
5. Are *ajumma* selfless? Why (not)?
아줌마는 희생적입니까? 왜 그렇습니까? 왜 그렇지 않습니까?
6. Describe two other women whom you believe are *ajumma* (i.e. their life and activities).
아줌마라고 생각되는 여성 두 명을 묘사해 보십시오. 예를 들어, 그들의 삶과 행동 양식 등을 묘사해 주십시오.
7. What, if any, changes do you believe are required in terms of
다음 물음에 대답해 주세요.
 - a. olean family life (한국 가정에서)
 - i. relationship of husband to wife
부부 관계의 어떤 면이 개선되어야 한다고 생각하십니까?
 - ii. relationship of children to parents
부모-자녀 관계의 어떤 면이 개선되어야 한다고 생각하십니까?
 - iii. care for the elderly
노인을 보살피는 것 중 어떤 면이 개선되어야 한다고 생각하십니까?
 - iv. relationship of children to parents-in-law
장인장모와 사위의 관계는 어떤 면이 개선되어야 한다고 생각하십니까?
 - b. education of women
여성의 교육 중 어떤 면이 개선되어야 한다고 생각하십니까?
 - c. portrayals of *ajumma* in the media

대중매체가 아줌마를 묘사하는 것 중 어떤 면이 개선되어야 한다고 생각하십니까?

d. *ajumma* and the workplace

직장에서 아줌마를 대하는 태도 중 어떤 면이 개선되어야 한다고 생각하십니까?

e. representation of women

여성이 정치에 더욱 많이 참여해야 한다고 생각하십니까

f. relationship of older and younger women (*ajumma*, *halmoni*, *agashi*)

젊은 여성(아가씨)과 나이든 여성(아줌마, 할머니)의 관계에서 어떤 면이 개선되어야 한다고 생각하십니까?

8. What is the biggest challenge for *ajumma* and democracy in Korea today?

오늘날 한국의 아줌마와 민주주의가 직면하고 있는 가장 큰 도전은 무엇입니까?

9. What have you done about this challenge?

위의 도전에 대해 당신이 취한 행동이나 조치가 있습니까?

10. What should *ajumma* do about this challenge?

아줌마는 자신에게 다가오는 도전에 대해 어떻게 대처해야 하겠습니까?

11. What should men do to help the *ajumma* regarding this challenge?

아줌마가 직면한 도전을 극복하기 위해 남성들이 도울 수 있다면, 그것은 무엇이라고 생각됩니까?

12. Does Confucianism help or hinder *ajumma*? Why (not)?

유교는 아줌마에게 도움이 된다고 생각하십니까? 왜 그렇게 생각하십니까?