

## Ideology of Korean Modern Girl's Fashion During 1920-1940

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In response to political challenges including fourth-wave feminism and the Me-Too movement, the subject of female empowerment and feminism has been one of the most significant topics in the fashion field. From the mid-2010s, this ideology has been featured in fashion shows such as Prada's spring/summer 2014 collection and Christian Dior's spring/summer 2017 collection. Employing fashion as a medium to deliver messages and gain public support has been a longstanding strategy of feminists since the first-wave of feminism during 1850-1920. A feminist ideal of the era, the term of New Woman has often been used to describe independent and educated career women enjoying physical and social activities (Buzwell, 2014). The suffrage movement to gain women's right to vote significantly influenced the New Woman who sought more visible and active roles in the public arena. Suffragists often represented their values with a tri-color scheme of white, purple, and gold (Komar, 2016). The passing of the 19th amendment in 1920 in the United States was one of the conclusions of first-wave feminism or the New Woman era, which was followed by a newly emerging postwar generation known as flappers.

A small elite group called *Sin Yeo Seong*, which literally means new woman, had emerged during 1900-1910 and increased by the early-1920s in Korea (Suh, 2014). They were the beneficiaries of modern education, which enabled them to actively participate in the public domain with professional jobs. Before the twentieth century, there were extremely rare opportunities for Korean women to receive a formal education and participate in public activities. During 1920-1930, a subgroup of the Korean New Woman known as the Modern Girl emerged with the spread of western culture and an increased number of educated working women (Min, 2013). They wore western style clothes, hairstyles, and make-up, and enjoyed modern city life with leisure activities such as theatre, café life, and shopping at department stores. Because of their appearance, especially their bob hairstyle, the Modern Girl was called *Mo-dan Girl* by phonetic transcription: the Chinese characters *mo* (毛) and *dan* (斷) mean "hair" and "short," respectively. The Modern Girl phenomenon in Korea was heavily influenced by the Japanese Modern Girl which was highly similar to the flapper movement in the United States. The Korean Modern Girl, as many cultural icons of a certain era do, brought about intense controversy between social groups. Critics targeted their fashion choices, denouncing the new views of women's rights and lives that the Modern Girl phenomenon represented.

In order to understand the implications of Modern Girl's fashion, the author investigated the representative styles of their fashion and the responses of various social groups to their fashion and lifestyles. The study considers how the different groups used Modern Girl's fashion as a battleground to fight for or against their new thoughts and ideas regarding ideal womanhood. For this research, the author conducted on-site investigation of historical artifacts that were housed in the Gunsan Modern History Museum and the Suwon Museum of Art in Korea. The author also investigated articles and illustrations referencing Korean Modern Girl's fashion and lifestyles published in private newspapers and magazines during 1920-1930.

The Korean Modern Girl also brought about intense social responses in mass media just as flappers in the United States and *modan garu* in Japan did (Min, 2013). The Modern Girl expressed their

modern identity with their fashion styles including western style dress, short hairstyles, heavy make-up, and fashion accessories. The articles from newspapers and magazines regarding Modern Girls phenomena, especially cartoons and illustrations, well illustrate public sentiments accusing the Modern Girl of being bad girls who were against the Confucian teachings empathizing modesty, filial duty, and practice of balance and moderation.

Western style dress, especially the short skirt, was placed at the center of criticism. A cartoon published in *Chosun Ilbo*, one of the representative private newspapers of the era, depicted an imaginary and exaggerated situation in which women exposed their legs, rebuking Modern Girl's fashion (Ahn, 1932). For Korean women in *Chosŏn* dynasty (1392-1910), exposing bare skin in public was not appropriate according to Confucian modesty. They were required to wear headdresses to avoid exposing their faces to strange men when they went out (Cho, 2017). Therefore, Modern Girl's fashion that was represented by wearing short skirts revealing their legs was a cultural shock to the Korean of the era. Their bob hairstyle was blamed for violating the Confucian teaching of "our body and hair are all derived from our parents, and therefore we have no right to injure any of them in the least" (Chen, 1908). Wearing expensive and splendid contemporary accessories also was criticized as evidence of Modern Girl's addiction for conspicuous consumption and obsession with western culture. They criticized Modern Girl's fashion as being against the Confucian teachings empathizing the practice of balance and moderation in one's daily life.

While Modern Girl's fashion choices were indeed completely different from traditional Korean women's dress, the criticism against them went well beyond the strangeness of their fashion and lifestyle. The critics took notice of disquieting ideas and messages implied in their fashion that could shake Korean society's ideological landscape of the era, especially regarding views of women's rights and lives. The perspectives on women started to change with the weakening of strong control of Neo-Confucianism over the Korean society from *Gaehwagi*, the period of enlightenment (1876-1910). The modernizers, especially the liberals and socialists during late 19<sup>th</sup> through early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, emphasized women's right for education to improve women's social status as one of the major agenda items for the modernization of Korean society. With this feminist approach, they expected the educated modern women to play vital roles in enlightenment and strengthening of the country and establish a new womanhood of independent and progressive subjects freed from the Neo-Confucian gender hierarchy.

Meanwhile, the conservatives promoted self-strengthening of Korea by reestablishing the cultural and ideological traditions while opposing modernization in the form of Westernization. With reversion of many Korean to the Confucian heritage as a means to resist against Japan's ruling after the colonization in 1910, the conservative nationalists became one of the two major groups leading the Korean independence movement along with socialists in the 1920s. Responding to a completely new educated, socially active, and liberated womanhood supported by the liberals and socialists, the nationalists proposed a new ideal image of women, *hyonmyong chonop chubu*, meaning a wise and prudent fulltime homemaker. When it became obvious that Korean women's social roles and status were going through an irreversible change after the 1920s, instead of running squarely counter to the irresistible wave of the women's right movement, the conservatives targeted Modern Girl's fashion and lifestyles that still looked strange and somewhat even dissolute to the average Korean people of the era. While reluctantly recognizing the need of women's education and limited social activities as shown in their proposal of the updated image of the

homemaker, the traditionalists noticed Modern Girl's fashion as the subject of their ideological battles regarding views of womanhood.

Modern Girls was the first group of women who boasted of their cultural identity using fashion in Korean history. The heated controversy for Modern Girl's fashion well illustrates how different social groups respond to a specific fashion based on their ideological viewpoints.

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