

Comparative Analysis of Women's Military Participation in East Asia

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Within political science where East Asia seems to be the scholarly flavour of the day, Western military analysts continue to focus their research on traditional, realist concerns such as military spending, technological advancement, and the North Korean threat, with little or no mention of the recent gender integration policies of the military services in the region.

When the world's largest all-female formation in military parade history – 378 Chinese women soldiers of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) – made its debut by goose-stepping past the Tian'anmen Rostrum during the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on October 1st, 2009, most observers noted their presence by describing the female soldiers' short hot pink skirts and knee-high leather boots: communist-realist kitsch reigned supreme. None thought of mentioning that the Chinese military has the same number of women as the US. Similarly, colourful images of dancing and sword-yielding servicewomen's performances in North Korea overshadow the reports that females comprise up to 22 percent of the country's total military force levels, that they guard every tunnel and bridge, or that most of the artillery units along the North Korean coast are made up of women.¹ Nor does the reverse situation in neighbouring democracies raise any eyebrows. Despite extensive reforms and almost full integration, surprisingly low percentages of women in the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) of Japan (5.4%) and South Korea's armed forces (4%) hardly even earn a footnote in most Western scholarly works.

While in the past two decades scholars have sought to hypothesize the relationship between various structural, institutional, cultural and international factors and degrees of women's military participation, particularly in North American and West European States that have experienced the most dramatic changes, precious little analysis has been devoted to East Asia, the only region where the Cold War is still raging and where citizenship in both democratic and non-democratic regimes is often defined in militarized and gendered terms. Yet, important questions need to be addressed: what is the current status of women in the military services of China, Japan, North and South Korea, and how useful are our Western theoretical models in explaining it ?

This article does not purport to be an exhaustive study that can fully capture the dynamics of women's military participation in the region. Rather, it is an attempt to conduct

¹ See "North Korean Forces Increasingly Manned by Women Soldiers", *World Tribune*, January 24, 2007 : http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2007/ea_nkorea_01_25.html, accessed July 10, 2015.

exploratory research on this understudied subject in East Asia and perhaps offer some answers about the way democratic and non-democratic regimes approach it. First, it will present the Western theoretical explanations of women's military participation. Second, it will review the literature on the impact of Confucian culture, ideology and history of militarism on gender relations as it might help us understand the context within which women are integrated into militaries in East Asia. Next, by providing empirical evidence, it will show that although Western theories are unable to fully explain women's military participation in East Asia, they are not wrong in their assumption that high economic participation and the presence of women in technical and professional fields in the civilian market will "spill over" into the military labour market. Last, by briefly tracing the process of women's military participation in individual States, it will demonstrate that such "spill-over" is facilitated by the Communist glorification of women as workers that challenged Confucian gender inequality and female participants' long and rich history in the armed forces of China and North Korea. More specifically, it will argue that in those two non-democratic States, where the "party controls the gun", where women are more economically active, and are recognized – at least officially – by the military and political leadership as equal defenders of the socialist cause both in politics and economic life, women's military participation will be higher. On the other hand, in South Korea and Japan, low levels of female economic activity and often-strained civil-military relations due to collective historical experience of victimization and commodification of women's bodies – in South Korea by colonial and neo-colonial powers, in Japan also by their own military – have led to lower levels of women's military participation. They have also produced apathy with regard to gender integration policies on the part of women's movements as well as of these democratic societies at large.

Proposed Models and East Asian Context

The early Western theoretical models identified three categories of variables broadly titled "military, social structure, and culture" and argue that women are more likely to be integrated and enjoy a higher degree of participation in States experiencing manpower shortages due to demographic and economic factors, and where egalitarian societal and cultural values support such policies. Moreover, women are more likely to be participating in modern all-volunteer forces that are primarily defensive in nature, during times of either high or low threats to national security, and serving mostly in administrative and logistical roles (Segal, 1995). The first attempt to expand the model by adding domestic political actors and institutions as possible factors, proposed that States with legitimate civilian-led governments, liberal political leadership, egalitarian public policy initiatives, and non-violent sources of political change will have greater participation of women in the military (Iskra *et al.*, 2002). Others suggested that we need to add a fifth set of variables that look at the international security circumstances, the way threats change over time and national perceptions of those threats (Kümmel, 2002). While these ground-breaking studies ought to be lauded for their

remarkable work on theoretical systemization, conceptualization and measurement, notably of their cultural variables, they have remained largely underdeveloped.

Lastly, the most recent and more empirically rigorous works on women's military participation in NATO States contend that besides conscription ratios and threat levels, levels of women's labour force participation (Carreiras, 2006), particularly in the professional and technical fields, as well as the presence of strong autonomous domestic women's movements demanding change are strong predictors of gender integration in the military (Obradovic, 2014).

Culture, Ideology and Economic Participation

Taking into account East Asian Confucian cultural values, including strict social and gender hierarchy, respect for authority, and repression of personal for the sake of societal needs, offers an opportunity to explore those original theoretical propositions. In fact, much of the literature that examines determinants of women's current socio-economic status in East Asia and the process of economic modernization and industrialization, argues that export-oriented economic development in Confucian patriarchal States, particularly in democratic Japan and South Korea, has not necessarily produced a considerable growth of economic opportunities for women in the public sphere and that culture has been an obstacle. Instead of progress, it led to hegemonic masculinity in the workplace by creating a complex system of hierarchy similar to the traditional military structure, where subordination and sexualization of women are a norm, and the high-ranking and highly-paid jobs are reserved for men.² While it is often very difficult to assess and measure impact of cultural factors on national policies, these works successfully demonstrate that in Japan and South Korea, regardless of the rights bestowed upon women by these democratic governments, economic and political institutions are still considered male preserves. On the other hand, Communist emancipation of women and eradication of Confucianism in the public sphere in China to ensure the full participation of all citizens in economic sectors, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, has redefined and reconstructed sexual roles and over time led to greater equality and higher female participation in the labour force (Hong, 1997). This argument echoes some of those most recent Western theoretical works on the relationship between women's economic and military participation. Further, Xiolin Li (1993) offers additional support by arguing that, combined with a long history of women in warfare, the Communist Party's promotion of gender equality has in fact greatly contributed to women's participation in the modern Chinese military.

Women and Militarism in East Asia

A handful of works on women's military participation in individual East Asian countries provide an incredible amount of insight, even though none empirically tested all Western theoretical propositions, or attempted a larger comparative analysis. In South Korea,

² Cf. Greenhalgh, 1985 ; Roberts, 1994 ; Ogasawara, 1998 ; Chow, 2002 ; Barraclough & Faison, 2009.

according to some authors, women's participation remains limited due to the nature of the women's movement that chose to pursue pacifism and anti-militarism instead of autonomy and gender equality in the military (Choi, 2010). Others focus on the negative attitudes towards female soldiers that are seen as weakening military effectiveness and unit cohesion, thus detracting from the ability to confront North Korean threat (Goh, 2003 ; Kim, 2011). In Japan, Fumika Sato (2012) argues that extensive women's military participation policies were implemented by the government to soften and camouflage the SDF's militaristic character and recent participation in American wars, despite the lack of support from anti-militaristic Japanese women's movements. This antagonistic relationship between women in East Asia and military institutions in general, is the subject of many works on the Japanese Imperial Army's sexual exploitation of 200,000 "comfort women" in Korea and China during World War II as a form of both colonial domination and gender stratification in Confucian societies.³ The extension of this literature explores the effects of the post-war US military occupation on women in East Asia, particularly sexual exploitation, physical and sexual violence in South Korea and Japan.⁴ Although these studies regard women less as active participants in the armed forces than as victims of institutionalized militarism, they are crucial in helping us understand civil-military and gender relations in East Asia's only two full democracies.

Western Theories, East Asian Realities

First, contrary to the Western expectations, the two authoritarian States, China and North Korea, have higher levels of women's participation in the military than their democratic counterparts, Japan and South Korea. Chinese and North Korean militaries are both commanded by the Communist party and military leadership, whereas the Japanese and South Korean armed forces are led by democratically elected civilian regimes. Second, also contrary to expectations, States with higher levels of participation have lower levels of economic development as measured by GDP per capita in 2014 (China: \$10,756; N. Korea: \$1,800) than States with lower levels of participation (Japan: \$34,883 ; S. Korea: \$27,168). Third, only Japan has an all-volunteer force, whose purpose is primarily defensive, while the other three States' military services rely on conscription, and possess both defensive and offensive capabilities. Next, in terms of levels of threat, the two Koreas are still technically at war, yet there is a significant difference in the degree to which North and South Korea have integrated women into their military services. East Asian States are known for military stand-offs, and in more recent times for aggressive shows of force (*cf.* the Senkaku/ Diaoyu islands dispute between China and Japan). Moreover, manpower shortages due to low unemployment and birth rates have not caused governments to enlist more women either. In 2014, unemployment

³ *Cf.* Choi, 1997 ; Tanaka, 2001 ; Soh 2008.

⁴ Sturdevant & Slotzofus, 1992 ; Enloe, 1998 ; Moon, 1998.

rates in East Asian countries were all very low and almost identical: China 4.7%, Japan 4.1%, N. Korea 4.6 % and S. Korea 3.3%.

Particularly surprising and contrary to the models proposed is the lack of willingness to increase the numbers of servicewomen and improve their status despite the looming demographic crisis in both S. Korea and Japan. According to the Korean National Statistical Office, 20-year-old men generally numbered more than 400,000 from 1977 to 2003, a figure sufficient to sustain the 659,000 active-duty military population. But this number is projected to fall to 233,000 in 2025, and even below 200,000 in 2036. Although the 2005 Defence Reform calls for the reduction of the conscripted force to 500,000, little has been done to ensure those numbers. In Japan, where the number of eligible males aged 18-26 was 900,000 in 1994, that number will drop to approximately 600,000 in the next couple of years, and conscription will not be a possible solution due to Constitutional restrictions. It is important to note that such future demographic shortfalls also promise to make themselves felt in N. Korea, where the high child mortality rate stemming from the famine of the 1990s might soon become a crucial factor as that cohort comes of military age, and while the number of servicewomen is already high, the government might try to recruit even more women.

In terms of women's economic participation, whereas the female share of the Chinese labour force stands at 64% and in N. Korea at 72%, the S. Korean and Japanese rates are at 50% and 49%, respectively.⁵ In fact, Japan ranks 102nd in terms of economic participation and opportunity, while S. Korea ranks 124th.⁶ Although there is no current data for North Korea (nor has there been any collection since the mid-1990s due to famine and changing political circumstances), we do know that by 1970 women accounted for 70% of the work force in light industries, 60% of agricultural workers, and that a number of female professional and technical workers increased 10.6 times between 1963 and 1989.⁷ While China ranks first in the world in the number of women in professional and technical fields, Japan and S. Korea rank 78th and 98th, respectively (unfortunately, no similar data is available for N. Korea). Moreover, as predicted, women in South Korea's labour force account for only 10% of all executives (1.1% out of 710 executives in 140 financial firms are women: Kang & Rowley 2006).

Lastly, in terms of cultural and societal values, although in these States gender equality is institutionalized, in all four women's status at home continues to be shaped by the patriarchal Confucian teachings that prescribe gender division of labour and define women as mothers and household-caretakers.

The next section hopes to offer a closer look at the impact of cultural factors and ideology on women's public roles, including their economic participation and how these might affect women's military participation in individual states.

⁵ World Bank Gender Statistics, female labour force as a percentage of total, 2014.

⁶ World Economic Forum, *The Global Gender Gap Report*, 2014.

⁷ Park, 1992, p.537.

China

From the first known Chinese female general, Hao Fu (1250-1192 B.C.), who commanded more than 13,000 soldiers, and the 300 concubines of King Wu who were turned into loyal soldiers by Sun Tzu himself, to the early years of the Chinese Communist movement (1927-1935), historians have recorded women's participation in the ranks for over 3,000 years (Li, 1994). To this day, these ancient heroines and the battles they fought for their families, rulers, and peasant causes are known and celebrated. Over 3,000 women joined Mao on the 12,500-kilometer Long March (1934-35) in a wide range of combat and non-combat military positions, including direct guerrilla action. During the Yan An period (1935-1945), women joined the anti-Japanese movement in thousands, but their roles were now reduced to non-combat positions in nursing, logistics, communications, propaganda, and administration. This new supporting role continued after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and through the Korean War, with 150,000 Chinese women serving in medical, cultural and communications units. Their participation abruptly ended in 1955 as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) adopted a Soviet model of military organization, and 764,000 women were demobilized.

It was not until 1967 that women were officially integrated in the PLA and recruited at a rate of 7,500 per year. Only girls from "Five Reds" families – workers, peasants, soldiers, staff and small merchants – were eligible to serve in the military, although women scientists, doctors and engineers who did not come from such families were able to join when their skills were deemed necessary. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), becoming a women soldier was "regarded as a privilege", and girls, inspired by the achievements of ancient heroines and Party doctrine, had to compete fiercely to obtain a commission (Li, 1993). In that period, Confucian ideas regarding societal hierarchy, women's "natural place" at home and as a subordinate of males were rejected by both Mao and the Party, and new gender roles were promoted. Women shed the image of "bourgeois" gentle femininity and feminism by donning men's military combat clothes, cutting their hair like boys, and using belts to interrogate and beat the "enemies of the State". Mao himself had written "Militia Women", glorifying women in uniform in a poem that would become a popular song. Roughly translated, the lyrics are:

Early rays of sun illuminate the parade grounds
And these handsome heroic girls in the wind,
With rifles five feet long,
Daughters of China with a marvellous will,
You prefer hardy uniforms to colourful silk.

By the time the Cultural Revolution ended, militarism and gender-neutrality had replaced feminism and femininity in the public discourse of China (Honig, 2002). This new gender discourse really meant that women's political identity was not going to be defined in terms of differences between women and men, but derive from State and Party definitions. In

addition, after the former political criteria expressing preference for “Five Reds” were abandoned, more female professionals educated in the civilian sector were able to enter the military and pursue stable careers.

The policy remained unchanged until the 60th Anniversary parade in October 2009. Eleven days after the women’s exceptional performance, the Ministry of National Defence raised the maximum age of 22 to 24 for female graduates with a four-year degree, and from 21 to 23 for those with a three-year degree, particularly those with technical degrees. Prior to the most recent changes, the PLA largely relied on unemployed men with limited education from rural areas who lacked other sources of income and opportunity. But as market forces are reaching deep into the Chinese mainland, and as the government attempts to modernize the PLA and sharpen its image as a sophisticated and technologically advanced armed force, it is beginning to tap into the pool of talented and highly educated young women willing to join as the service offers privileges such as reimbursement for tuition fees, and (at a time of global economic and financial downturn) employment opportunities.

It remains difficult to understand the precise role that these women actually play in the military given that entrance exams require them to demonstrate their artistic skills and even show off their physical appearance.⁸ While many female soldiers will be working in communications, health care and administration, China’s policies to correct the imbalance in the military despite six decades of women’s participation, are starting to deliver. Today PLA women are sent to escort missions in the Gulf of Aden, are assigned to signal, telegraph, radar, steering and sail-and-cordage posts, operate submarines, pilot fighter jets, fly space missions and as of August 2014, PLA Navy has its first spokeswoman, Senior Colonel Xing Guangmei. Women would not have been able to participate in such numbers had they not been given opportunities in the civilian market first by the Chinese Communist regime.

North Korea

In contrast to China, there is very little evidence of ancient woman warriors on the Korean peninsula. The Neo-Confucian philosophy adopted by the Chosun dynasty (1392-1897) prescribed a very strict and limited role for women as wives serving husbands, in-laws and male heirs whereas loyalty and sacrifice for the country were virtues attributed strictly to men. One of the most striking and dramatic changes in North Korea was the Sex Equality Law passed on July 31st, 1946 that erased all patriarchal relations and granted women equal rights in labour, politics, pay, education and society in general.

From the beginning, this legislation directly affected women’s participation in the military forces. Unlike the women of South Korea, who were mainly recruited to serve in medical corps during the Korean War, North Korean women were integrated into the ranks of the military and performed a variety of functions (Leitich, 2006), including hit-and-run

⁸ “PLA raises recruitment standards for women”, *People’s Daily Online*, October 12, 2009.

operations, guerrilla combat, sabotage, surveillance, intelligence gathering, and deceptions (they were known to disguise themselves as refugees and kill UN troops). The Mansudae Grand Monument in Pyongyang, or the infamous holy shrine of Kim Il Sung, reveals a handful of women bearing weapons standing shoulder to shoulder with men. Kim Jong Suk, Kim's wife, and the North's most famous war heroine, is a symbol of this equality thanks to her guerrilla exploits battling the Japanese and her excellent marksmanship. She often declared proudly that her son Kim Jong Il learned to walk with her rifle in his hand. After the war, women were recruited on a limited scale for rear-area duties: psychological warfare units, hospitals, administration, and anti-aircraft units. Most women were assigned to units defending fixed installations near their workplaces.⁹

After the war, due to manpower shortages, the government required all citizens to participate in production, and women were particularly encouraged to join the workforce to revolutionize themselves. Women's participation in labour was not a question of equality but rather a necessity to cope with the post-war economic recovery. By the 1970s, women's economic participation equalled that of men (Kang, 2008). In contrast to China, Confucianism remained strong within the domestic sphere, but also in the way "Leadership" was constructed. Both men and women were to follow their *Oboi Suryongnim*, or the Leader who is both father and mother, thereby erasing the question of gender from the official discourse, and today there is no adequate word for gender at all in the North Korean dialect (Ryang, 2000).

The real change in women's military status came with the fall of the Soviet Union and the leadership of Kim Jong Il. North Korean armed forces were faced with a serious manpower shortage after an estimated 2% of the North Korean population, particularly able-bodied men, fled to China to find work, and some 5% died of starvation during the mid-1990s. The government was forced to adapt to the circumstances by passing the "Songun", or "military-first", policies, giving the military supremacy in ruling the State over the Worker's Party, and expanding its role across every aspect of socio-economic life (Gause, 2006). This policy only further militarized the State, creating one of the largest armies in world, with an estimated 1.2 million active-duty personnel. Until the early 2000s, as the government hardly needed it, conscription had never really existed in North Korea: the perks and privileges that came with military service were powerful incentives which ensured that men joined in large numbers. However, now that small businesses were bringing in more money, the State was unable to recruit enough men, and a draft system was initiated in 2002.

We also know that Kim Jong Il called on women to "*more dynamically wage the all-out charge to build a thriving nation full of faith in sure victory and optimism and demonstrate the revolutionary spirit of the Korean women*".¹⁰ This "*rational use of manpower*", as Kim Il

⁹ North Korea Country Study, Library of Congress, Federal Research Division Series, June 1993.

¹⁰ "N. Korea Calls for Women's Increased Role in Economic Campaign", *Yonhap South Korean News Agency*, July 30th, 2009.

Sung had referred to the recruitment of female workers since 1960s, seems to have been simply extended by Kim Jong Il to include talented and skilled women in the military.

It is difficult to find exact numbers of women in the armed forces of North Korea but it is possible to estimate given that in 2002, of 36 units that Kim Jong Il visited, “*at least one-third were female units*”.¹¹ Women serve for seven years, and are most generally dispatched to anti-aircraft artillery, signals or machine-gun corps units in the rear.¹²

A member of the female elite artillery unit who defected in 2003 claims the military did not allow her to speak to her family and other ordinary citizens, to ensure she did not go “soft” and lose discipline and mental and ideological strength the way the Soviets had done. She explained that every day involves two hours of political indoctrination, in which women are taught not to fight South Korean soldiers, just the Americans who occupy the rest of their peninsula, and two hours of military strategy, equipment training and tactics instruction. She also admitted that the promise of better opportunities and glorious heroism has faded in the last few years, and that she was forced to scour fields for withered cabbage leaves to survive.¹³

The survival of its military force and to a large extent the maintenance of the regime itself today increasingly depends on North Korean women. Although Western models predicted correctly that conservative societal and cultural views will be overridden by military needs, they do not explain the difference in extent to which South and North Korea integrated women, given their same high levels of security threat and Confucian patriarchal cultural heritage.

There is no doubt that the Communist type of emancipation has only brought new forms of oppression to the women of North Korea, by demanding that they produce, reproduce and defend. Although women have been champions of economic mobilization and the defence of the nation, the revolutionary equality so eloquently articulated by the despotic regime remains elusive in the light of continued discrimination in the social, familial and cultural life of the country. Yet, there is a hope that their increased participation in economy, particularly with the emerging small-scale market activity, and their continued military service might start to challenge the loci of power and traditional societal relations.

South Korea

Women were first admitted in 1948 as part of the Nursing Corps and in 1950 the Women’s Army Corps was officially established, but during the Korean War (1950-1953) most women served only as surgeons, dentists and nurses. The regulations limiting their participation based on age, marital status, and motherhood were eliminated in 1987 after the

¹¹ James Brooke, “As North Korean Men Turn to Business, Women Join the Army”, *The New York Times*, August 17, 2003.

¹² *World Tribune*, January 4, 2007, *loc. cit.*

¹³ Robert Marquand, “Bleak Tales of Army Life in N. Korea : A Defector from an Elite Women’s Unit Speaks of Tight Control and Fear of ‘Going Soft’”, *Christian Science Monitor*, May 13, 2003.

first democratic elections. In 1990, in the name of gender equality, a separate women's branch of the military was abolished and females were fully integrated into the services. After the election of Kim Young Sam, who proposed the change, military academies opened their doors to women, starting with the Air Force in 1997, followed by the Army in 1998 and the Navy in 1999, with 10% of seats reserved in each for women. By 2001, the first female commissioned and non-commissioned officers had entered both the Air Force and the Navy, and with the exception of certain marine and commando units, today women serve in all branches.

Yet, women's numbers remain incredibly low compared to other democratic societies and are tightly controlled by the government. South Korea, one of the most militarized democratic nations in the world, suffers a distinctive deficit of women in their military services. As of January 2015, just 10,000 of the 630,000 active-duty personnel are women. By 2020, it is supposed to rise to 11, 606 to make up a meagre 5.6% of all forces. Beyond the number problem, discrimination and sexual harassment are rampant, as are abuse and sexual violence as means of reinforcing Confucian culture of gender hierarchy and hegemonic masculinity within the military institution.

These cultural factors have influenced the association of women and the military for most Korean nationals ever since the Japanese Imperial Army implemented sexual slave conscription and institutionalized rape of "military comfort women" or *jugun ianfu*. Most Korean women victims of this crime were silent for almost 50 years, primarily for the sake of self-preservation and protection of their dignity, as chastity continued to be a priority of these Confucian women. One can argue that it is the Confucian philosophy of subordination of women that has allowed for both their brutal recruitment and imprisonment, as well as the collective silence of the nation on this sensitive subject for more than half a century.¹⁴ This commodification of the woman's body by the Japanese in Korea has created a gendered perspective on the military. In South Korean culture, a man's loyalty to the State, his citizenship and even economic future are inherently tied to his military service, while women are only to be used by militaries to dehumanize, humiliate and victimize the nation. Combined with the official discourse that is based on militarized manhood and masculine national pride in Korean women's chastity, this gendered construction of the military institution promotes the control of women's sexuality by the State and, as Hyunah Yang points out, "*perpetuates rather than seeks to understand or overcome the colonial legacy*".¹⁵

¹⁴ On the Japanese side, neo-Confucian beliefs regarding loyalty and sacrifice were manipulated and used to serve the militaristic purposes of imperial Japan, and later contributed to the failure to acknowledge the forceful conscription of female sex slaves until January of 1992, when Chuo University history professor Yoshiaki Yoshimi uncovered documents implicating the government in the library of the Japanese Self-Defence Force. Only a month later, a famous Japanese conservative writer, Kamisaka Fuyuko, argued that recruitment of comfort women in Korea was a necessary evil to protect respectable women from sexual abuse by Japanese soldiers. But as Watanabe (1995) argues, this double standard of Confucian thought, trapped the women as sexual slaves not only during the war, but also by not allowing them to speak of the violence for so long.

¹⁵ Yang, 1998, pp.129-130.

Moreover, the Korean government officially sanctioned prostitution and the sex industries to cater for American soldiers, educated its women in English and etiquette, and sent them into military camp towns to earn hard currency. As a 71-year-old former prostitute-turned-activist argued, “women like me were the biggest sacrifice for my country’s alliance with the Americans. Looking back, I think my body was not mine, but the government’s and the US military’s”.¹⁶

Although one can speculate on the future of the reform to modernize South Korea’s military and abolish compulsory service, today’s all-male conscription not only continues to be central to both the construction of the anti-communist rhetoric and organization of its economic and industrial development, but promotes a gendered construction of the political and economic spheres in this industrialized and modern democratic State. It is possible to conjecture that the necessary condition for the expansion of the roles and numbers of women entering military forces as true equals is that masculinity cease to serve as chief component in the official construction of South Korean national identity and citizenship.

Japan

Similar to the Koreans, with the exception of a great Japanese epic, *Heike Monogatari*, which glorifies female *samurai* and *naginata*, there is hardly any documentation of women’s military or war participation. During World War II, while men were conscripted, all single women between the ages of 14 and 25 were obliged to work in factories, under the Ordinance for Cooperation with the National Patriotic Labour Corps, in order to solve the serious labour shortage. Although by the end of the war the military suffered tremendous shortfalls, the Japanese government failed to conscript women and some argue that this speaks to “static psycho-cultural views about the place of women in society”.¹⁷ Finally, in June 1945, the Volunteer Army Military Service Code (*Kokumi Giyu Heieiki Hou*) was enacted to organize women into army combat troops, but this code was never implemented.

After the war, women were first admitted only as nurses into the new force. In 1967, they were allowed into clerical positions in the Ground Forces, and in 1974 in the Maritime and Air SDF. In addition, as the abundant economic opportunities in the private sector reduced the number of young Japanese men willing to join the SDF, Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei initiated legislation that was to open other positions for women away from the combat lines, “to fit their nature”.¹⁸ This first opening to women was largely motivated by the manpower shortage, and given the complex realities of Cold War civil-military relations in a State where the military as an institution was discredited, and soldiers treated with contempt and distrust, military policies were largely ignored and seen as irrelevant by society (Arrington, 2002).

¹⁶ Sanghun Choi, “Ex-Prostitutes Say South Korea and US Enabled Sex Trade Near Bases”, *The New York Times*, January 7, 2009.

¹⁷ Havens, 1975, p.916.

¹⁸ Frustuck, 2007, pp.88-89.

No civil society activists, including women's movements, always worried about a return of militarism in post-war Japan, demanded women's integration (Sato, 2010).

But what initiated the current policies of the SDF regarding women was the ratification of the UN's Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and subsequent civilian Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) of 1986. Before the passage of this law, Japanese society was characterized by an extreme gender inequality largely determined by the Confucian teachings and gender-proper personality beliefs, according to which women's place is at home, while men are primary earners and fit for positions of power. However, after the passage of the 1986 EEOL, gender relations and traditions have been altered, and have increased the percentages and status of women in the politics and economics of Japan (Gelb, 2000). This specific piece of legislation forced the SDF's doors open and led to the expansion of the role and numbers of *josei jieikan*, or female soldiers. By 1993, all three branches started recruiting women, and they were enrolled in the National Defence Academy in 1992. Their international debut in 1996 was as members of the transportation unit of the peacekeeping operations in the Golan Heights. They were also deployed to East Timor and more recently to Iraq.

According to a 2008 Defence Ministry decision, women are in principle allowed in all positions. Yet, the list of exceptions to the rule remains impressive.¹⁹ These measures are “*in comprehensive consideration of protection of maternity, possibility of direct combat, securing privacy between men and women, and economical efficiency*”.²⁰ The SDF reserves the right to revoke or suspend any other assignments if these conditions are not met. The last restrictions lifted by the Defence Ministry Office for the Promotion of Gender Equality opened positions on destroyers, minesweeper tenders, and patrol helicopters.

While 14,000 (5.4%) of the 259,800 uniformed personnel serving in Japan's Self-Defence Forces are now women, their role clearly remains rather limited. They are often described as “*female beauties in uniforms*”. Last year, SDF hired Azusa Yamamoto, a bikini model to pose in military garb for its 2014 calendar to supposedly lift morale.²¹

This exaggerated focus on the femininity of Japanese women, their purity and “maternity” only serves to emphasize traditional values that sanctify motherhood and highlight women's obligation to procreate rather than defend – the same values that allegedly protected Japanese women from the wrath of the Imperial Army by recruiting “comfort women” elsewhere. While the victimization of these women during the war went unacknowledged by

¹⁹ Women are thus still barred from the following branches, specialties, formations or roles : infantry, armour, engineers, reconnaissance, anti-tank helicopter sections, chemical protection units, tunnel companies, landing ships, submarines, guided-missile patrol-boats, special guard units, fighter- and reconnaissance aircraft pilot roles.

²⁰ Restriction on Assignments of Female SDF Personnel (After Review), September 22, 2008. Available on line at : <http://www.mod.go.jp/e/about/remarks/2008/press20080922a.pdf>.

²¹ Michelle Lynn Dinh “SDF Show Off Their Feminine Side with Calendar”, *Japan Today*, February 27, 2014.

the Tokyo trials even though all the necessary evidence had been collected by the US military intelligence unit, the lack of punishment eventually led to a complex situation in which Japan's lack of apology to this day is a key factor for the understanding of interactions between women and the military in Japan and South Korea. What further complicated such interactions was the fact that the control of the bodies of Japanese women and their sexuality by the State only started after the war ended as the government resuscitated "comfort divisions" to cater for the US soldiers' Recreation and Amusement Association. Although that organization was disbanded in 1946, regulated and unregulated prostitution has remained to date with the tacit approval of the State, as it does in South Korea. Moreover, crimes and rapes committed by US military personnel against Japanese as well as Korean women to this day are out of the jurisdiction of these two States, and continue to influence the way society thinks about gender and military. It remains to be seen if the government will seek to remove both social and institutional barriers for women in the SDF or if it will continue to emphasize gender-appropriate roles and promote the image of a woman as a weak victim in need of a male protector.

Conclusion

This brief narrative is the first comparative attempt to analyze military participation of women in East Asia that sought to verify the application of previous theoretical models based on Western democracies. While limited data and access to the information regarding women in the ranks of all four states significantly affect the ability to generalize, it is possible to draw certain conclusions regarding the factors that can help explain the reasons behind women's numbers and role in the militaries of East Asia. Although in all four States women's status at home continues to be shaped by the patriarchal Confucian strict gender division of labour, all four claim that the same is not true in the public sphere. However, this assertion is questionable. Highly developed and democratized South Korea and Japan continue to have considerably low levels of women's participation in the economic sphere as governments continue to emphasize women's primary duty as a mother and a homemaker. This might help explain the small numbers of women in their military ranks. In addition, what might explain the lack of interest by the public in the slow progress in this matter is the tragic history of militarization of women's lives for the sake of the greater good of the society. Continued focus on the negative imagery in both Korea and Japan of women as sexual victims of military forces affects the way the society associates gender with military, and how it debates integration of a "victim" into the ranks of their violators. In fact, discussions in both are rare, but heated.

On the other hand, without the stigma attached to female presence in the military as in Korea and Japan, in China and North Korea, young women are increasingly joining the armed forces in search of the economic opportunities, perks and benefits that service under arms can

bring them. Both governments have integrated women to solve the manpower shortage under the guise of revolutionary equality and women's emancipation. What might have initially been lip service paid to the Marxist ideas on which Chinese and North Korean modern States were established, women were allowed as active participants in revolutionary movements and have thereafter been portrayed as champions of the socialist cause. Equality in East Asian Communist terms will certainly not neatly fit the Western definitions as it is often a way of corrupting women's lives. Yet, regardless of how twisted this version of equality might be, it has allowed for a better integration and wider participation of women in the military than in the democratic States of the region.

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