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A Queer temporal rupture in Confucian modernity

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Resumen / Resum /Abstract

My paper primarily investigates why an increasing number of South Korean women are choosing not to marry or have children and, in many cases, are considering living abroad. According to the latest birthrate report, South Korea ranks the lowest among 252 countries and regions. Through the lens of postmodern queer temporality theory, it analyses how these women, while not necessarily identified as queer, choose to challenge traditional expectations related to marriage, motherhood, and remaining in their home country.
The dissertation focuses on the political and economic context of South Korea, as well as the social and cultural changes that have redefined the roles of South Korean women. Through an analysis of South Korean society, contemporary literature, and the influence of the Hallyu Wave, it looks at how the new identities of South Korean women are being configured in the digital age. This work also considers how South Korean women are reconfiguring their notions of maturity, responsibility, happiness, and the future, moving beyond the norms established by Confucianism and feminism. Ultimately, the study aims to understand how these women are reimagining their roles and futures, and how this phenomenon reflects a common crisis facing East Asian women.

En mi trabajo final se investiga principalmente por qué un número cada vez mayor de mujeres surcoreanas eligen no casarse ni tener hijos y, en muchos casos, están considerando vivir en el extranjero.
Según el último informe sobre la tasa de natalidad, Corea del Sur ocupa el último lugar entre 252 países y regiones. A través de la lente de la teoría posmoderna de la temporalidad queer, analiza cómo estas mujeres, aunque no necesariamente se identifican como queer, eligen desafiar las expectativas tradicionales relacionadas con el matrimonio, la maternidad y la permanencia en su país de origen.

La disertación se centra en el contexto político y económico de Corea del Sur, así como en los cambios sociales y culturales que han redefinido los roles de las mujeres surcoreanas. A través de un análisis de la sociedad surcoreana, la literatura contemporánea y la influencia de la ola Hallyu, analiza cómo se están configurando las nuevas identidades de las mujeres surcoreanas en la era digital. Este trabajo también considera cómo las mujeres surcoreanas están reconfigurando sus nociones de madurez, responsabilidad, felicidad y futuro, yendo más allá de las normas establecidas por el confucianismo y el feminismo. En última instancia, el estudio pretende comprender cómo estas mujeres están reinventando sus roles y su futuro, y cómo este fenómeno refleja una crisis común que enfrentan las mujeres del este de Asia.

El meu article investiga principalment per què un nombre creixent de dones de Corea del Sud opten per no casar-se o tenir fills i, en molts casos, es plantegen viure a l'estranger.
Segons l'últim informe de natalitat, Corea del Sud ocupa el lloc més baix entre 252 països i regions. A través de la lent de la teoria de la temporalitat queer postmoderna, analitza com aquestes dones, encara que no necessàriament s'identifiquen com a queer, opten per desafiar les expectatives tradicionals relacionades amb el matrimoni, la maternitat i la permanència al seu país d'origen.
La tesi se centra en el context polític i econòmic de Corea del Sud, així com en els canvis socials i culturals que han redefinit els rols de les dones sud-coreanes. A través d'una anàlisi de la societat sud-coreana, la literatura contemporània i la influència de l'ona Hallyu, s'observa com s'estan configurant les noves identitats de les dones sud-coreanes en l'era digital. Aquest treball també considera com les dones sud-coreanes estan reconfigurant les seves nocions de maduresa, responsabilitat, felicitat i futur, avançant més enllà de les normes establertes pel confucianisme i el feminisme. En definitiva, l'estudi pretén entendre com aquestes dones estan reimaginant els seus rols i futurs, i com aquest fenomen reflecteix una crisi comuna a la qual s'enfronten les dones de l'est asiàtic.

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I. Introduction

Over the past few decades, South Korea has undergone profound social and economic transformations that have significantly reshaped individuals'—particularly women's—perspectives on the future. Once recognized as one of the "Four Asian Tigers," South Korea's rapid economic growth has not only bolstered national income but also altered traditional family structures. The expanding opportunities for women to pursue higher education and participate in the labor market have led many to delay marriage and childbearing.

This shift in questioning the social obligation to marry and have children is not limited to South Korea. Other East Asian societies, such as Japan and Taiwan, have witnessed similar trends, indicating a paradigm shift in both the conventional female role and the "normal" life cycle. However, due to the speed and nature of these transitions, South Korea's case is particularly noteworthy and has drawn significant academic and policy attention.

Recent research points to an increasing number of young South Korean women opting not to marry or have children. This upward trend is evident in official data, reflecting both a declining birth rate and a growing tendency to delay—or even forgo—marriage altogether. According to data from the Korea Statistical Information Service (KOSIS, 2023), the country's total fertility rate hovered around 0.721 in 2023, marking the lowest level in the nation's history. Marriage rates have seen a similar decline, with only 192,000 registered marriages in 2022—representing a 40% drop since 2012 (OECD, 2023).

Behind these statistics appears to be a quiet revolution: millions of South Korean women are choosing not to marry, not to become mothers, and in some cases, to question their relationship with the country itself.

a) Planteamiento y objeto del tema

Rapid modernization in South Korea has led to a clash between Confucian familialism and neoliberal individualism. Confucian thought traditionally upholds the ideal of women as "good wives and wise mothers," yet contemporary economic instability has undermined this notion. Under the traditional family structure, Korean women face high expectations: they are responsible for rearing children, caring for their parents-in-law, and often managing the daily needs of their husbands. Within such an unequal family system and under immense work pressures, the

conventional timeline of women's roles has been disrupted and transformed. Now, women in Korea face a double burden.

According to recent data, the youth unemployment rate in South Korea hovers at 21.3% (OECD, 2023), while housing prices in Seoul have surged by 120% since 2017 (Bank of Korea, 2023). Consequently, in a highly competitive job market, Korean women work up to 12 hours a day, only to return home to unpaid caregiving tasks such as cooking, cleaning, looking after children, and demonstrating filial piety to both their own parents and their in-laws (Cho, 2021).

In addition, they are confronted with societal sexism and more insidious forms of gender oppression. Feminists refer to the resulting situation as "Hell Joseon 2.0"—a dystopian reality in which marriage and motherhood are tantamount to economic self-sabotage. In the face of global changes, intense work pressures, and persistent gender inequality, growing numbers of Korean women are envisioning alternative life pathways and desiring greater autonomy. Many are redefining their futures by foregoing marriage or choosing not to bear children.

As Kim Ji-young laments in Cho Nam-Joo's novel, "I will not give up my career. What I'm giving up is my life" (Cho, 2016, p. 89). This poignant statement underscores the tension between societal expectations and individual aspirations, highlighting how Korean women navigate—and sometimes reject—the constraints imposed by both tradition and modernity.

Han Kang, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2024 and is also a Korean woman, portrays a female protagonist in *The Vegetarian* who declares, "I don't want to eat anything… I want to disappear" (Han, 2007, p. 45). When we consider Han's work in conjunction with the reality that many Korean women opt not to marry or have children, it becomes apparent that the pursuit of autonomy and personal freedom seems destined to shape the future trajectories of Korean women.

b) Hypothesis and objectives

The core hypothesis of this work is that the process of redefinition of family structure and gender roles in South Korea is closely related to the disintegration, or at least radical transformation, of the traditional Confucian family.

From the perspective of ongoing social transformations and their broader implications, the study of this phenomenon is significant because it encompasses changes in Korean culture and highlights the reconfiguration of gender, family, and social belonging. Consequently, the choice not to marry or have children, as well as the desire to pursue opportunities abroad, has emerged as a prism through which to examine the intersection of modernity, globalization, and cultural persistence.
Furthermore, the effects of globalization and Korean popular culture—such as K-pop, television dramas, films, and literature—have placed Korea at the center of international attention. These cultural products reveal features of a postmodern society shaped by technological development, while also starkly contrasting with certain conservative elements that remain embedded within the social structure.

In this context, the issue invites society to reconsider the normative patterns of life, prompting reflections on how women, in particular, are formulating a new narrative that breaks away from the established life course. By examining the root causes of this trend, one can gain insight into how women are negotiating, resisting, and reshaping traditional expectations, thereby contributing to broader societal conversations about identity, belonging, and the evolving definitions of success and fulfillment in modern Korean society.

The second hypothesis is related to the theory of postmodern queer temporality. According to postmodern queer temporality theory (Halberstam, 2005), Korean women are already undergoing a queer temporality process. Although these women are not necessarily considered queer, their experiences reflect the reconfiguration of norms around maturity, responsibility, and happiness.

Halberstam's concept of queer temporality disrupts the linear "life script" of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death—an entrenched script that underpins not only Korean society, but also much of East Asia and, indeed, the broader world. Although queer theory has traditionally centered on LGBTQ+ communities, even Korean or East Asian women who do not identify as queer are nonetheless altering the traditional heterosexual adult timeline. In doing so, they pose a challenge to Lee Edelman's (2004) concept of reproductive futurism, which posits that societies view "the child" as the symbol of collective continuity. By declining to assume a maternal role, these Korean women directly confront that societal expectation.

For example, alongside the global MeToo movement, Korean women have galvanized various new feminist movements within their country. One such instance is the “4B” movement—a feminist commitment to avoiding dating, marriage, sexual relationships, and childbirth. This movement exemplifies what Elizabeth Freeman (2010) calls “temporal drag”—the deliberate slowing of society’s prescribed pace. Although these women do not identify as “queer” in terms of sexual orientation, their defiance of normative expectations signals a thorough reimagining of maturity and responsibility.

The objectives set for the completion of this master's thesis are:

- Study the conflict and integration of Confucianism and contemporary feminism in Korean society, and their impact on women's ideas and behaviors. This includes analyzing the historical status and modern application of Confucian philosophy in Korean family and social structure, as well as how Western feminist thought was introduced and localized, and how it influenced Korean women's gender consciousness and feminist movement. At the same time, it will explore how these two seemingly opposing ideological systems interact in contemporary Korean society and shape the opportunities and challenges faced by women.
- Analyze the formation mechanism and social significance of "N-PO identity" in Korean society. It will explore why more and more Korean women choose not to marry and have children, and regard this as an active social choice and a reflection on traditional gender roles. From the perspective of postmodern feminism, use Judith Butler's gender performance theory to analyze how this escape and resistance to traditional gender roles constitutes a resistance to patriarchal society and Confucian culture, and explore the individual autonomy and subversive significance of the traditional gender order it contains. From the perspective of postmodern feminism, this paper focuses on how unmarried and childless Korean women can achieve self-empowerment at the personal and social levels, including autonomous decision-making in career development, personal lifestyle, and social participation. At the same time, it will explore how they break through the single-gender norms of traditional female roles and show diversified gender expressions and identity.
- Using Halberstam's queer temporality theory, this paper analyzes how Korean women challenge traditional life norms through life choices on non-traditional timelines. This

study will explore the applicability of the "queer temporality" theory in the Korean context and analyze how unmarried and childless Korean women construct their own life rhythm and life trajectory by delaying or rejecting traditional "social clock" nodes such as marriage and childbirth. The study will examine the specific manifestations of this "time resistance" in the public sphere (such as "sacrificial strike") and the private sphere (such as single lifestyle and non-marital intimate relationships), as well as its challenges to traditional Confucian time concepts and liberal feminist "balance" narratives. It explores the dilemmas and challenges faced by Korean women in the pursuit of individual autonomy and the reshaping of identity, which are similar to those faced by women in other East Asian countries. This study will briefly compare the common problems in the influence of Confucian culture, the status of women, and fertility concepts between South Korea and other East Asian societies such as Japan and China, in order to understand the structural dilemma faced by Korean women from a broader perspective.

c) Theoretical framework

These changes in Korean women's lives that challenge traditional life cannot be separated from the influence of Korean Confucianism and the emergence of the feminist movement. Halberstam's queer temporality theory, in turn, builds on this and allows people to re-examine the time of personal life, the way of family and maturity, and transcend the hegemonic traditional timeline expectations. To understand the status of women in Korean society, it is necessary to analyze Korean Confucian cultural thought, whose influence can be traced back to the Joseon Dynasty. Confucian values have historically guided family, political and social organization, emphasizing loyalty and hierarchy. Confucianism is based on asymmetrical power relations in family relationships, and filial piety assumes that sons (and to a large extent daughters) must obey and respect their parents, thereby ensuring the continuation of bloodlines and the stability of family relationships. Men (especially the eldest son) occupy a central position, while women are socialized to play the role of care and childbearing. For centuries, filial piety has been regarded as an adult responsibility that is collectively praised in Korea, but it falls particularly on women because they need to maintain the family unit and respect patriarchy and marriage. But within this framework, the deep-rooted patriarchy has always made women play a secondary role. Although women continue to improve their education and work rate, they still need to bear the responsibility of caring for others in the family, while men in the family are given priority.

After the period of accelerated industrialization following the Korean War, the traditional extended family model changed and gradually gave way to the nuclear family, and Confucian values were still effective in structure. Tu Wei-ming (1996)'s research shows that Korean culture at this time retained a strong sense of collectivism and family responsibility, which to some extent explains the continued existence of social expectations for women to marry and have children within a certain period of time. Although women's education level has greatly improved, the needs of family roles and mother roles still limit their share of the labor market, resulting in the so-called "double shift" or "double load" (Kim, 2018).

Feminism in South Korea has gone through different stages, from its first expression in the 1980s to the rise of mass movements in the 21st century. One of the most important recent milestones is the arrival of the wave of protests associated with the MeToo movement, which has had an impact in Korean society since 2018, when allegations of sexual harassment and violence against Hollywood public figures sparked a heated debate.

The movement has highlighted misogyny rooted in traditional social systems and the need to reform laws and social customs that allow gender violence to recur. At the same time, the "4B movement" of Korean women has emerged, namely no dating, no sex, no marriage, and no children. The movement was initiated by a group of young women who, in addition to denouncing gender violence, declared a radical rejection of the system they considered oppressive. This phenomenon, which is often discussed on forums and social networks, cannot be understood simply as an "anti-social movement" but as a radical response to a system that, in the eyes of these women, perpetuates inequality and symbolic violence (Lee, 2021).

In the past decade, the study of queer time has become an interdisciplinary field of research. Writers such as Jack Halberstam (2005) and Elizabeth Freeman (2010) have proposed the idea that queer experience means breaking temporal norms, that is, breaking with a set of expectations that dictate the correct sequence of life events (childhood, learning, etc.). That is, employment, marriage, childbirth, retirement. To date, the application of these theories to the Korean case has been limited, in part because most of the literature on queer time has focused on Western contexts and on subjects from the LGTBQ+ community. However, some approaches are beginning to emerge

that argue that the break with heterosexual women's expectations of marriage and motherhood can also be seen as a form of queer time or temporal deviation (Ahmed, 2006). By not adhering to the traditional chronology of adult life, which in Korea is particularly strongly manifested through family rituals and social pressures, these Korean women create spaces for resistance.

At the same time, the concept of queer temporality becomes particularly important when studying Korean women's literary and audiovisual narratives, because of the large number of characters who deviate from the traditional female path. For example, in Han Kang's novel The Vegetarian (2007), the protagonist radically breaks with the family norm. Although he does not explicitly identify himself as queer, from this perspective his rejection of social conformity and patriarchal impositions can be read as a different form of time and space that does not pursue childbearing or stable marriage. This reading opens the way to explore how Korean women can challenge hegemonic secular structures without necessarily claiming a non-heterosexual identity.

d) Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach that integrates feminist cultural studies with critical discourse analysis. Grounded in Confucian cultural theory, the contemporary feminist movement, and Jack Halberstam's concept of queer temporality, the research examines how women's identities and experiences are transforming within Korean society. Specifically, it focuses on textual analyses of Korean literature and film narratives, as well as digital discourse analysis of feminist online communities. The purpose of this analysis is not to quantify the social phenomenon under discussion, but rather to investigate the social logic, cultural expressions, and symbolic dimensions that underlie this rapidly growing trend in Korea.

The literary corpus includes representative works of contemporary Korean literature, such as Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*(2007) and Cho Nam-joo's *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* (2016), *High Kick!* (2006) and *My Liberation Notes(2022)*. These novels have been selected based on their significant social and media impact, as well as their portrayal of female protagonists who challenge traditional family norms and prescribed female roles. In addition to these literary texts, this study analyzes films by younger creators that depict the breakdown of marital expectations and familial pressures. Within this scope, works reflecting the realities of single or childfree Korean women, as well as depictions of feminist struggles and intergenerational conflicts, are considered. By examining films and television dramas that depart from traditional female stereotypes—such as recent popular

Korean dramas—it becomes possible to observe how popular culture receives and constructs new female identities.

Recognizing the significance of social networks, forums, and blogs in articulating feminist discourse and disseminating the "4B Movement," this research also conducts an exploratory analysis of digital content. This aspect includes posts from online communities, YouTube videos discussing reasons for remaining unmarried or childfree, and forums and news reports in which women consider emigration as a means to escape familial pressures. Incorporating a digital dimension aims to move beyond literary and cinematic representations, thus capturing the voices of women who have personally experienced these issues. By accounting for a broad spectrum of perspectives—from the most radical to the more moderate—this study endeavors to depict the heterogeneity of experiences and narratives.

The analysis presented here is grounded in approaches from cultural studies and feminist critique, involving gender-based perspectives and discourse-oriented interpretations of the selected materials. As such, the paper provides a critical cultural reading of texts and digital sources, supported by theoretical references to Confucian thought, contemporary feminist theories, and the framework of queer temporality. This multifaceted method enables an in-depth understanding of how the intersection of tradition, feminist activism, and evolving social norms shapes women's experiences in contemporary Korean society.

e) Structure of Trabajo Fin de Máster

The following is the outline of the paper's organizational structure. Each chapter will explore a core theme and provide a gradually in-depth analysis, and finally draw a conclusion. It aims to reveal how Korean women challenge existing gender norms and social expectations and show new gender expressions and lifestyles in the public and private spheres.

In the second chapter, the conflict between Korean Confucianism and Feminism, the complex interaction and internal tension between Confucianism and Western feminism in Korean society will be systematically sorted out. First, the status evolution of Confucian philosophy in the long history of Korea and its profound impact on social structure, family ethics and gender roles will be traced, focusing on analyzing its patriarchal hierarchy and traditional discipline of women's roles. Secondly, the path, development stage and localization process of Western feminist thought

introduced into Korea will be examined, and how it stimulates the gender consciousness of Korean women, promotes the rise of the feminist movement, and challenges the existing gender order. Finally, this chapter will focus on the collision and integration of these two heterogeneous ideological systems in contemporary Korean society, analyzing how they have shaped the opportunities and challenges faced by Korean women, and their complex situation of seeking self-positioning between tradition and modernity.

From the perspective of postmodern feminism, the paper will analyze in depth how the "N-PO identity" of non-marriage and childlessness in Korean society constitutes an "escape" and "resistance" to the traditional marriage and family model and patriarchal ideology. It will examine how individual women challenge traditional female gender roles by rejecting the fertility and marriage obligations given by society. Secondly, it will explore the practice of "self-empowerment" demonstrated by Korean women in this process, including autonomous decision-making and the awakening of subject consciousness in education, career, economy and personal life. This chapter will also analyze how they break through the constraints of traditional gender roles, show diversified self-identity and gender expression, and thus reshape their status in the family and society.

In the third chapter, the queer temporality phenomenon of Korean women will be formally introduced as a unique perspective to analyze Korean women's challenge to traditional time norms. First, the core concept of queer temporality and its deconstructive power on the linear time model will be explained, emphasizing its theoretical value in understanding non-mainstream life trajectories and the experience of marginalized groups in society. Secondly, the paper will explore the specific manifestation of queer temporality theory in Korean society, especially focusing on how unmarried and childless women construct a nonlinear rhythm of life by "delaying" or "refusing" key nodes in the traditional life course such as marriage and childbirth. This chapter will examine the different manifestations of this "time resistance" in the public and private spheres, such as challenging the time discipline of Confucian sacrificial culture through "sacrificial strikes" and autonomous time arrangements in single lifestyles and non-marital intimate relationships. Finally, it will analyze how this challenge to traditional time concepts subverts the time order centered on blood continuity in Confucian culture and the linear career development narrative with "balance" as the goal in liberal feminism.

This chapter will also analyze the experience of Korean women in the broader context of East Asian society, and explore the cultural dilemmas and social challenges faced by Korean women in the process of pursuing individual autonomy and reshaping their identities, which are similar to those faced by women in other East Asian countries such as Japan and Taiwan. Through comparative analysis, it reveals the universal influence of Confucian culture on women in East Asia and similar gender issues brought about by the transformation of modernity. Finally, this chapter will summarize and reflect on the progress made by Korean women in breaking traditional constraints, pursuing gender equality and individual liberation, and look forward to the possible trends in the development of gender relations in Korean society in the future.

The conclusion of the last chapter is: Through in-depth research on the group of unmarried and childless women in Korea, this paper reveals the reshaping and social practice of Korean women's subjectivity under the collision of traditional culture and modern thought. The study shows that through the path of "escape, resistance and self-empowerment", and with the help of the analytical framework of postmodern feminism and queer temporality theory, Korean women are actively challenging traditional gender norms and time order, showing diversified identity and lifestyle. This change is not only about the liberation of individual women, but also foreshadows the profound transformation of gender relations in Korean society, and provides important inspiration for understanding the social changes of women in East Asia.

II. The conflict between Confucianism and Feminism in Korea

1. The influence of western feminism to Korean society

1.1. The evolution of the feminist movement

Beginning in the 1960s, Western countries experienced the emergence of the second wave of feminism, which focused primarily on equal employment rights, reproductive rights, and legal gender equality (Freedman, 2002). By the 1980s, the third wave of feminism had placed greater emphasis on difference, diversity, and identity politics, disseminating feminist ideas worldwide through transnational women's organizations and international conventions such as the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) (United Nations, 1979). Against this global backdrop, feminist thought in South Korea gradually gained public attention—particularly as women scholars returning from abroad fused Western feminist theories with local social issues, thereby facilitating initial improvements in Korean women's rights (Kim & Park, 2019).

Nevertheless, the practice of feminist movements in South Korea was never a mere replication of Western models. Instead, these movements became embedded in Korea's own sociocultural framework, often encountering resistance from Confucian norms regarding family and gender roles, as well as constraints on public expression during periods of military governance (Chang, 2022). As a result, early Korean feminism concentrated on concrete issues such as reforming Korean family laws, legislating against sexual violence and harassment and achieving labor market equality, endeavors aimed at carving out a legitimate space for women's survival between tradition and modernity (Lee, 2020).

With the acceleration of Korea's democratization process in the late 1980s, expanded political and social arenas provided a broader platform for feminist activism. Numerous women's organizations and NGOs were founded, directly critiquing social injustices (Kim & Ryu, 2021). They advocated, for example, abolishing discriminatory clauses in household registration, employment, and property inheritance, culminating in amendments to the Equal Employment Act, acted in 1987. Throughout the evolution of feminist activism workplace gender discrimination has remained a central concern. Issues such as the promotion gap, wage disparities, and the motherhood penalty, as well as sexual

harassment, have repeatedly been documented in social surveys and research (Korea Women's Development Institute, 2019). With more women attaining higher education and participating in the workforce, demands for workplace equality have intensified.

Female voices in the public sphere attracted increasing media and social attention. Some highly educated women—often with overseas academic backgrounds—introduced Western feminist theories through newspapers and television, fostering a collaborative dynamic between institutional and grassroots efforts (Chang & Lee, 2018).In addition, despite differences in social policies and ideologies, the era of democratization has provided the possibility and feasibility for feminism to take root, prompting more Korean women to realize that women's issues are not just personal dilemmas, but also a manifestation of injustice under the social structure. As more and more social movements emerge, internal differences have gradually emerged. The more moderate factions tend to take a step-by-step approach to achieve gender equality at the policy level (Kim & Park, 2019). At the same time, some radical feminists believe that simply incorporating women into the existing political and economic structures is not enough to eliminate the root causes of gender oppression. For example, the high aesthetic standards for women in Korean society gave rise to the escape the corset movement in the late 2010s, and many women chose to give up complicated makeup and strict dress codes to break free from the constraints of a single standard for women's appearance (Kim, 2021).

The widespread use of the internet and social media further transformed the issues and trajectories of the Korean feminist movement. In 2015, the online community "Megalia[1]" sparked public controversy with its provocative and satirical rhetoric (Lee & Jung, 2021). Originally founded to address misogyny and discrimination in Korean online discourse, it employed a tactic of mirroring —exposing male-centric viewpoints and double standards by effectively turning the tables. Though Megalia dissolved amid internal disputes and external criticism, it inaugurated a new phase in Korean online feminism, catalyzing broader public debate.

During the same period, the "*4B Movement*" (rejecting romantic relationships, sexual relations, marriage, and childbearing) arose as an explicitly radical feminist response to Confucian gender

[1] In 2015, when news broke two Korean women in Hong Kong with MERS symptoms had refused to be quarantined, misogynistic posts appeared in the online community 'MERS Gallery', and female users responded in the same way, changing the subject to men. Afterwards, the name of the gallery was combined with the Norwegian feminist novel 'Egalia's Daughters' to create an online community called Megalia. It leaded one of radical feminist movements on the South Korean. It's well known for the mirroring strategy of misogynist contents or reversed gender roles, intending to provoke laughter or outrage.

hierarchies (Choi, 2020). This movement highlights women's right to make autonomous decisions about marriage and childbearing, challenging the traditional Confucian ideal that deems such roles a woman's sacred duty. For many young women faced with workplace discrimination, childcare burdens, and conflict with mothers-in-law, choosing 4B is not merely a personal lifestyle preference but also a political statement protesting the social regulation of women's roles.

As social media proliferated, significant changes emerged in how feminist movements organize and mobilize. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram offer accessible outlets for spreading feminist issues, enabling women to share personal experiences and coordinate collective actions. Although controversial, online communities such as "*Womad*[2]" and "Megalia" partially dismantled the mainstream media monopoly, allowing more ordinary women to make their voices heard and find solidarity (Lee & Jung, 2021). It is important to note that digital platforms not only unite feminists but also serve as battlegrounds where anti-feminist groups launch attacks. Online discursive battles highlight the deep divisions regarding feminism in Korean society, thrusting previously concealed gender conflicts into the spotlight (Choi, 2020). Within this tension and interaction, feminist aims have grown increasingly diverse, broadening their scope beyond mere legal equality to include lifestyle choices, bodily autonomy, and gender culture.

Against the backdrop of globalization and the unique structures of Korean society, the country's feminist movement has progressed through various stages: enlightenment–institutionalization–digitization–radicalization. While the democratization era offered a platform for feminist thought, the digital age has equipped feminists with rapid mobilizing capabilities, allowing them to confront Confucian gender norms more directly. Whether through "*Megalia*" or the "*4B Movement*", women's vigorous pushback and satire target patriarchal systems and societal prejudices. Focusing on workplace discrimination, appearance-based anxiety, and sexual violence, these efforts further underscore modern Korean women's reassessment of self-identity and societal worth. Confronted

[2] WOMAD (Korean: 워마드) is a women's online community based in South Korea. It was founded in 2016, splitting from Megalia, another radical feminist online community, after Megalia began restricting homophobic and transphobic terms.

by both Confucian traditions and capitalist pressures, the feminist movement continues to advocate institutional reforms while striving to expand the possibilities for women to redefine their identities. Through the interplay of digital platforms and public discourse, this collective force is steadily growing, poised to inject greater inclusivity and creativity into Korea's social development.

1.2. Anti-Marriage/Anti-Childbearing as Political Action

The genesis of the 4B Movement lies in feminist critiques of the institution of marriage and the social expectations surrounding motherhood. In traditional Confucian societies, women have often been viewed as the moral and familial cornerstone, with their primary responsibility being the continuation of the family line—a norm that persists in contemporary Korea through strong familial and societal pressures. By collectively rejecting dating, marriage, and motherhood, 4B adherents challenge the very foundation of these prescribed obligations. Furthermore, the " no sex"component serves as a bold statement of bodily autonomy. As noted by writers like Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, and bell hooks, in highly patriarchal contexts, sexual relationships can frequently involve exploitation, coercion, and an uneven distribution of pleasure and emotional labor (MacKinnon, 1989; Dworkin, 1987; hooks, 1984).

In combating sexual violence, the 2020 disclosure of the "Nth Room Case[3]" case heightened public awareness of the severity of digital sexual violence (Kim & Lee, 2021). Numerous feminist organizations and internet users collectively called for stringent legal reforms and the establishment of more robust preventive measures. This highlighted the prevalence of sexual and online violence in contemporary Korean feminist discourse, while underscoring the new forms of oppression facing women in the digital era.

At its core, the 4B Movement calls for a thorough redefinition of what it means to be a woman in Korean society—one unbound by marital or familial duties. This stance resonates with global feminist perspectives emphasizing individual autonomy and self-determination. However, in South

[3] t is a criminal case involving blackmail, cybersex trafficking, and the spread of sexually exploitative videos via the Telegram app between 2018 and 2020 in South Korea. The scale of the victims, their age groups, and the severity of the crimes had a huge impact on Korean society as a whole. It raised awareness of cyber sex crimes, and related laws were continuously strengthened or revised. However, on the other hand, it caused some women to distrust the Korean political and judicial system, and it can be said that it became one of the many backgrounds for the development of radical feminist movements.

Korea, the movement assumes a distinctive form due to the continuing influence of Confucian values and socioeconomic pressures—such as soaring real estate prices, intense job market competition, and persistent gender wage gaps—that create a challenging environment for those who do choose to marry and have children.

One significant driver behind South Korean women's decisions to forgo marriage and motherhood is the heavy economic cost of childrearing. Korea's highly competitive educational culture and expensive childcare infrastructure impose substantial financial strains on parents—especially mothers, who often feel pressured to compromise their careers to care for children or manage intensive educational preparations. This imbalance highlights what is commonly referred to as the "motherhood penalty," in which women bear long-term economic and professional repercussions for having children.

From a feminist perspective, the choice not to have children can be seen as an assertion of bodily autonomy and a rejection of patriarchal norms that primarily value women for their reproductive roles. In a capitalist society that simultaneously demands high productivity, motherhood becomes an even greater burden when it comes to earning potential, career advancement, and personal freedom. Thus, the decision to remain unmarried and childfree is not merely a personal convenience; it represents a stance against a rigid social structure that views women's bodies and labor as public resources.

An increasing number of young Korean women deliberately opt out of the "housewife track" and instead focus on professional development. By staying single or delaying marriage and childbearing, these women maintain greater control over their incomes, career trajectories, and lifestyle choices. Some establish small businesses, work freelance, or seek opportunities abroad—all endeavors that become considerably more complicated when tied to traditional family responsibilities.

Overall, the political dimension of anti-marriage and anti-childbearing movements lies in how they directly confront long-standing societal expectations of women's bodies and lives. By consciously rejecting marriage and motherhood, participants challenge the conflation of women's identity with domestic life in Korean society, seeking new possibilities for personal fulfillment, professional growth, and genuine equality.

2. The intersection of confucianism and feminism

2.1. Confucian familism and double oppression to Korean women

Confucianism originated in ancient China. Its system includes a series of ethical and moral concepts and philosophical thoughts, which later spread to other countries. Founded by the Chinese philosopher Confucius in the fifth century B.C, Confucianism emphasizes ritual traditions, moral cultivation and family ethics. Its thoughts shaped the thought patterns and behavioral norms of human beings in the entire East Asia from B.C to AD. Confucianism covers philosophy, religion, rationality and lifestyle, but it is not static. During the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897), Confucianism underwent a profound transformation from political ideology to social system, which had a significant impact on all aspects from state governance to personal family life.

Against this background, the Joseon Dynasty adopted the new Confucianism with Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism as the core, and used it as a blueprint to establish a social order with clear hierarchy and gender differences. Based on Korean Neo-Confucianism, a strict hierarchical system and gender segregation institutional framework were established with the help of the code. Especially under the aristocratic two-class system, the Confucian hierarchy was deeply rooted in the social structure. The typical example is the rule that "*the husband is the head of the wife*", which clearly stipulates that women are in a subordinate position both legally and ethically, institutionalizing unequal gender relations. In the mid-Joseon period, there was a policy of openly promoting so-called "*heroines*" (열녀), erecting monuments to women who committed suicide to maintain their chastity, and thus constructing an idealized image of women who are extremely loyal to Confucian morality (Kim Eun-hee, 2015).

At the practical level, the Joseon Dynasty promoted the Confucian gender order in many aspects, reinforcing the patriarchal logic of favoring sons over daughters. First, the household registration system (호적) required women to be registered under the name of their father or husband. They were not qualified to become the head of the family, and in this case, they would be directly deprived of the right to independently own or inherit property. Secondly, only male descendants had the right to worship their ancestors and preside over ancestral worship ceremonies. Thirdly, the education system at that time excluded women from the imperial examinations (과거). They could only receive limited moral teachings and female discipline through books such as "*Nei Xun*" (내훈)

and "*Nü Xun*" (여계), because these books advocated women's submissive behavior and praised women for staying at home to take care of their husbands and children.

Today's South Korea under the influence of Confucian ideals and capitalist logic, Korean women still and often face two major tensions. On the one hand, Confucian familism expects women to sacrifice themselves for the family, and caring for offspring and elderly relatives is regarded as a core obligation. On the other hand, the *capitalist* market rewards personal achievement and consumption power. Women are often caught *between these two narratives*: on the one hand, they are expected to be *"good wives and good mothers*" and take on most of the care and emotional support, and on the other hand, they are encouraged to succeed in their careers to demonstrate independence and self-worth (Kim Ji-young, 2019).

Confucian norms have, in the past and in the present, exerted a *double oppression* on women: on the one hand, denying their subjectivity; on the other hand, granting them limited power within the family by having them fulfill the role of "*good mother and good wife"* (e.g., managing the family finances). However, this power always depends on not challenging the gender order; thus, the dominance of patriarchy remains largely unchanged. Therefore, whether they devote themselves to family life or pursue their careers, women often face criticism from the outside world-this dilemma is often referred to as a "*double bind*." Therefore, in modern Korean workplace culture, "pre-modern" Confucian norms coexist with "postmodern" capitalist structures.

Feminism places strong emphasis on individual agency and the right to choose, which inevitably clashes with Confucian notions of sacrificing personal interests for the benefit of the family and community. Within the Confucian family structure, women are often viewed as domestic laborers and emotional support providers who must care for the elderly and assume reproductive responsibilities.

Feminists question why these obligations fall so disproportionately upon women, while also critiquing the pressure to produce heirs for family lineage. From a feminist perspective, marriage and childbearing should be freely chosen rather than forced by social or familial expectations. Yet, in traditional Confucian contexts, women who refuse or delay marriage and motherhood risk being labeled as unfilial or "immoral," sometimes even accused of "destroying the family" (Kim, 2019). In

fact, there’s a study by Seoul University found that about 70% of Korean women who insisted on being single were labeled “unfilial” by their families (Lee Min-ji, 2021). These data show that Confucian traditions are not just historical relics, but continue to influence social life in more subtle ways. They also show that as more and more Korean women find themselves constrained by Confucian norms, they are increasingly inclined to avoid marriage and childbearing as a way to escape these pressures.

At the same time, this invisible labor gave rise to the concept of "*parental debt*" (부모 빚) in the context of Confucian filial piety: parents' heavy investment in their children's education and living expenses is regarded as a debt that their children must repay in the future. After entering the workplace, the younger generation is often burdened with huge housing loans and family subsidies, which ultimately delays marriage and childbearing (Cho, 2020). This "investment-filial piety-debt" framework not only continues the Confucian emphasis on blood ties, but also intensifies the capitalist demands on personal economic capabilities.

In modern Korea, especially during the postwar reconstruction and industrialization process, Korea rose rapidly through an export-oriented development model, achieving what is often called the "*Han River Miracle*". However, the country's success did not stem from free market logic alone; rather, it was jointly shaped by the institutional and cultural dimensions of Confucian familism.

Scholar Chang Kyung-seop uses the framework of ***"****compressed modernity*" to explain how Confucianism in contemporary Korea has been disintegrated. According to his view, during the period of rapid modernization, family structure, socioeconomic conditions and individual life cycles have been compressed, leading to the instability of the Confucian order that was originally based on maintaining family bloodlines (Chang, 2010). Young people are forced to complete education, employment, marriage and childbearing in a short period of time, often reducing or even abandoning the traditional practice of filial piety or continuing the incense.

In this compressed time environment, Confucianism's emphasis on family ties and strict hierarchy of seniority and inferiority has lost most of its appeal to the younger generation, and instead has become a passive social obligation or even a "shackle". Therefore, Chang concludes that Confucianism is facing an unprecedented structural crisis in the process of Korea's encounter with modern capitalism and individualism.

As the government vigorously promoted industrialization and urbanization, it also utilized the Confucian concept of "family community" (가족 공동체), viewing the family as a multifunctional social unit: in addition to traditional family and emotional needs, it also served as a unique "labor reproduction market". The invisible labor that Korean women put in in household affairs, childcare, and cooking not only maintains family life, but also indirectly saves the country a lot of social welfare costs.

During Korea's industrialization period (1960-1990), Park Chung-hee's regime combined Confucian family ethics with capitalism, encouraging women to become "housewives" - thereby providing unpaid domestic labor to support male workers and taking on the heavy responsibility of educating their children as "mothers". The Confucian norm for women can be summarized as the "*Three Obediences*" (삼종지도): obey your father when you are young, obey your husband when you marry, and obey your son when your husband dies. Although this norm has been adjusted during the colonial period and modernization process, its core concept still exists.

2. Principal doctrine of Confucianism in Korean family

Korean Confucianism has always operated around three interrelated core principles from ancient times to the present. The first is the absolutization of filial piety and its expansion into a dual obligation of loyalty to the state and family responsibility. For women, this is often reflected in the expectations of "serving the parents-in-law" and "bearing children", and the need to obey and follow the teachings of older elders. For example, among the "*seven evils*" of the Joseon Dynasty, a husband could legally divorce his wife if she did not want to have children. The second is the naturalization of hierarchy within the family unit: under Confucian patriarchy, differences in age, gender and generation are transformed into power hierarchies. The principle of "primogeniture" not only governs the distribution of economic resources, but also men always come before women, which ensures men's monopoly on family decision-making and control of power within the family unit. The third principle is spatial segregation based on gender roles: "*Men outside, women inside*" (남녀유별) refers not only to the division of family roles, but also to separation in physical space—women are confined to the "*inner room*" (안방), or the home, to do housework, while men occupy

the “*sarang*” (사랑채), participating in public affairs in the outside society or public areas (Jang Seo-young, 2018).

No legal system in Confucianism can better reflect the essence of Confucian patriarchy than the "*household head system*". First of all, it is to institutionalize women in a family unit through the form of law, because the system must be centered on a male household head, and the wife, children and even the male's mother can only be family members other than the household head. This system shows that when a woman is born into her own family, her father or grandfather is usually the head of the family. If a woman wants to build her own family, the head of her household registration book must become her husband. If her husband is not there, it will become her son. This system shows that women are always just vassals within a family unit, and their legal identity will always belong to the men in this household registration book. If an illegitimate child can only take the mother's surname, it will be labeled as discriminatory. Therefore, the household head system fundamentally deprives women of their qualifications as independent legal subjects. It makes the continuation of paternal bloodline the only legal standard and is the direct embodiment of Confucian patriarchy in the modern national legal system.

It is precisely because of the patriarchal symbolism and substantive significance of the household head system that it has become the focus of the Korean feminist movement for half a century. Since the 1950s, organizations such as the Korean Women's Federation have defined the household head system as the worst of the worst laws, exposing the fact that women cannot escape from domestic violence, as well as discrimination and social oppression against single mothers. The existence of this law concerns the lives of thousands of women. Feminist lawyers and groups have continuously filed lawsuits with courts at all levels and the Constitutional Court. The household head system seriously violates the basic principle of equality for all in the Constitution of the Republic of Korea. In the constant struggle against the Constitution and patriarchy, the movement to abolish the household head system was launched in the late 1990s. Many women participated in the petition to the National Assembly, extending the legal regulations to the entire country's social process.

On February 3, 2005, South Korea took a decisive step to end the household head system of male superiority and female inferiority. The Constitutional Court of South Korea made a legal ruling, determining that the household head system that had been maintained for more than a hundred years was unconstitutional. Kang Jinshi, then Minister of Justice of South Korea, explained the reason for proposing the amendment by saying: "*The household head system is not in line with the spirit of*

gender equality stipulated in the Constitution and the various family forms that have emerged from the development of the times." He advocated a truly democratic country, and no longer used male-centered bloodline and family order as the dominant norms for women's universality. On January 1, 2008, the household head system was replaced by a new "identity registration system", and for the first time, Korean women obtained an independent subject status that was completely equal to men in law. This victory was not only a modification of the legal provisions, but also a fundamental impact on the Confucian family concept that dominated Korean society for hundreds of years. It eloquently proved that through unremitting institutional struggle, the feminist concept of equality can defeat the deep-rooted Confucian traditional culture.

Although it has experienced the baptism of modernization, the gender inequality inherent in the Confucian family structure and the traditional expectations of women's roles have increasingly highlighted their potential function as an oppressive force in the context of modern society. First, in the Confucian context, the family is the most basic social unit. Women usually face inevitable tests after entering marriage. They are expected to take care of the entire family and the elders. In particular, the high importance attached to continuing the family bloodline, as well as the resulting pressure on fertility, especially the desire for male offspring, also make many Korean women feel a heavy burden on marriage.

It is particularly noteworthy that traditional ritual celebrations, such as weddings and family gatherings on holidays, should be important occasions for gathering family members and inheriting cultural customs. However, in Korean society, these celebrations often evolve into additional burdens and invisible pressures on women. Traditional customs represented by ritual celebrations and sacrificial activities, as well as the resulting social and family pressures, are becoming an important reason why many Korean women are deterred from marriage and even feel a heavy burden. The bride and her family often need to spend more time, energy and financial resources, especially in preparing dowries and entertaining guests. The various cumbersome etiquette during the wedding process often makes the bride feel physically and mentally exhausted and unable to truly enjoy the joy of the newlyweds. Family gatherings during holidays often mean that married women have to bear far more labor than other family members.

During traditional festivals such as the Spring Festival (*Seollal*) and the Mid-Autumn Festival (*Chuseok*), women usually have to undertake a lot of food preparation, cooking, cleaning and other labor. This labor is often unpaid and not fully recognized, but it is regarded as the filial piety that women such as daughters-in-law or mothers should fulfill and an important way to maintain family harmony. Sacrifice (제사) is another traditional custom in Confucian culture that puts great pressure on married women. The core of sacrifice is to remember and worship the deceased ancestors in order to obtain the blessings of the ancestors and maintain the continuation of the family.

In traditional Confucian families, presiding over the sacrificial ceremony is usually the responsibility of men, especially the eldest son. However, the preparations before the sacrifice, including the purchase of ingredients, cooking, placement of offerings, and the conduct of the ceremony, are often undertaken by the women in the family. This gender division of labor of "*men are responsible for the outside and women are responsible for the inside*" and not allowing women to participate in the sacrificial rituals is a clear discrimination against women who have made great efforts and secondary sex.

After entering marriage, women will be emphasized the Confucian concept of "*three unfilial acts, and the greatest is to have no offspring*", which makes women who fail to give birth to children bear tremendous pressure in the family and society. This pressure comes not only from the husband and the in-laws, but also from the whole social opinion. Many newlywed women face the dual pressure of giving birth from the family and society soon after marriage, making childbearing an almost unavoidable obligation and causing their career or career to stagnate. In "*Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*", Kim Ji-young also had her own career ideals and pursuits before marriage, but after getting married and having children, in order to take care of the family and children, she had to give up her career and become a full-time mother, suffering from depression, which was caused by the fierce conflict between the long-suppressed personal needs and the excessive family responsibilities.

This "*motherhood penalty*" is still prevalent in modern Korean society. Many women have to interrupt or give up their careers after giving birth. Even if they return to the workplace, they often face unfair treatment such as reduced promotion opportunities and reduced wages. This obstacle to career development makes marriage and childbearing a potential career "suicide" in the eyes of many women who pursue personal value realization. Since women are considered more caring, they are often expected to be the primary caregivers. When women break this stereotype, they are less popular because they violate the normative stereotypes about women as mothers. (Laurie A, 2001)

At the same time, the description of the sacrificial scene in the novel deeply reveals the huge labor burden and emotional pressure that women bear in this traditional custom, as well as the resulting exhaustion and powerlessness of marriage and family life. When personal achievement and happiness are sacrificed in marriage, young Korean women will embark on the path of giving up marriage. Therefore, if the household registration system is a rigid reform measure at the legal level, then the domestic labor assigned to women in Korea's sacrifices and ceremonies is a rigid transformation that needs to be made at the behavioral level.

In addition, in the traditional Confucian family structure, the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is often seen as an inevitable challenge in marriage life. Daughters-in-law are expected to devote themselves completely to taking care of their parents-in-law and managing their husband's family. Any behavior that fails to meet these expectations, even a slight negligence, may be regarded as a manifestation of "unfilial piety" or "immorality". This harsh requirement for daughters-in-law makes many young women worry and fear about the future relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law before marriage. Negative cases of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts in Korean cultural works and online communities have further exacerbated their negative impressions of marriage. For young women who seek independence and desire equal family relationships, this traditional mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship model is undoubtedly a huge source of pressure and potential conflict, which greatly reduces their willingness to get married.

Therefore, this crisis of Confucianism not only represents a collapse at the ideological or institutional level, but also marks a critical moment for Korean women to reshape their identity in the face of modernization and globalization. When women are able to become economically independent in society and no longer rely on men or their extended families, they can directly challenge patriarchy and Confucian authority. In this sense, the weakening of Confucian norms may enhance the possibility of female autonomy. As the theme of this article emphasizes, the entanglement between Confucianism and women's decisions against marriage or childbearing is not just a family ethics issue; it is closely related to broader social structural and cultural transformations.

Moreover, the feminist pursuit of equality often runs counter to the hierarchical ethos of Confucian society. Confucian values privilege seniority and collective interests in both political and social structures, while feminism calls for women's equal opportunities in employment, education, and public spheres—a demand that upsets the Confucian view of women as inherently subordinate or "other." Particularly in areas like inheritance, ancestral rites, and household registration, traditional beliefs continue to constrain women's legal and social status, and calls for legislative or policy reforms frequently encounter strong opposition from conservative groups. Emphasizing the Confucian axiom of *"family harmony above all else*", these conservative voices depict feminist movements as radical threats to social stability (Lee & Choi, 2021).

Finally, the rise of networked and digital media has intensified the feminist challenge to Confucian ideals. On one hand, women can mobilize public opinion through social platforms, exposing instances of gender violence and discrimination, and advocating for systemic and cultural change. On the other hand, anti-feminist sentiment also spreads rapidly online, employing Confucian concepts of filial piety and "family values" to accuse feminists of "betraying tradition." This dynamic is especially pronounced among younger generations who aspire to break free from patriarchal structures yet feel constrained by Confucian cultural norms and social judgments, leaving them in a state of ambivalence (Park, 2020).

The tensions between feminism and Confucian thought reveal a deeper structural dilemma in Korea's modernization: whether the priority should lie in defending family-based hierarchies or in upholding individual and gender-based rights. As more women challenge conventional marriage and childbearing patterns, question family roles, and rally for solidarity through online communities, feminism exerts a profound impact on Confucian cultural frameworks. Resolving these tensions necessitates not only legal and policy reforms but also a comprehensive reassessment of social and cultural norms, ultimately paving the way for an environment where women can exercise greater freedom and equality.

2. Reconstruction of Korean female identities

2.2. Escape and Resistance from the Perspective of Postmodern Feminism

In recent years, the Korean media often use the term "N-po generation" to describe young people who "give up" traditional life goals (such as marriage, love, and childbirth) due to socioeconomic pressure. This concept originated from the "three-throwing generation", which refers to the young generation who gave up love, marriage, and childbirth. Later, it evolved into the "five-throwing generation", which gave up buying a house and maintaining interpersonal relationships on the basis of three-throwing, expanding the number of abandonments to five. The "seven-throwing generation" that emerged later further gave up the two dimensions of hope (expectations for the future) and career development, bringing the total number of abandonments to seven. So N represents an uncertain number, referring to a group that can give up some or even more life goals or life wishes. The social structural reasons under this label are mainly concentrated on the long-term accumulated economic pressure in Korean society. So, can Korean women who are unwilling to get married or have children be uniformly classified as the N-po generation? The answer is no.

Due to Korea's economic environment, high living costs, difficulty in finding employment, and high social pressure are all reasonable reasons for Korean young people to give up the traditional life path, so they have to give up traditional life goals such as buying a house, getting married, and raising children. In order to understand this structural problem, we cannot regard Korean women as passively succumbing to economic and social pressures. On the one hand, they have not given up many aspects of life. They are active in personal growth, family of origin, and friendship. It is just that in the context of traditional marriage and childbearing, women bear more family burdens, so they will stagnate on the road to establishing their own traditional families. On the one hand, many women will interrupt their careers or career advancement due to marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, childcare, children's education, and taking care of the family. On the other hand, people escape and resist traditional marriage and childbearing, not because of economic pressure. On the contrary, it is about empowering themselves to live in a Korean society influenced by patriarchy and Confucianism. As revealed by postmodern feminist theory, individuals are not just forced to give up under social structures, but reflect and question these structures. Therefore, it cannot be summarized as a structural loss, but has conceptual limitations.

The N-po label ignores the subjective initiative and identity reconstruction logic of Korean women and men. This label simply regards them as victims of society, which is too simplistic (Claudine, 2023). First of all, there are indeed serious structural factors behind the low marriage rate and low

fertility rate currently facing Korean society. The highly competitive economy, high cost of living, unstable job market and heavy family burden do objectively limit women's willingness to get married and have children. According to the latest data from the Korea National Statistical Office, one in four married women aged 35 to 39 in South Korea have experienced a career break due to childcare, marriage and other reasons, and the total number of women who have had a career break is 1.215 million. As of 2019, the number of women who had a career break was 1.699 million, a decrease of 484,000 in five years. The proportion of married women who had a career break also dropped from 22.2% to 15.9% during the same period. The most common reason for women who quit their jobs after a career break was childcare (41.1%). The second most common reason was marriage (24.9%), pregnancy and childbirth (24.4%), taking care of the family (4.8%), and children's education (4.7%). The most common reason for a career break was more than 10 years (41.2%), and more than 5 years but less than 10 years (22.8%). The number and proportion of married women are decreasing year by year. Statistics show that although the risk of career interruption has been reduced compared to the past, this means that the number of unmarried women continues to increase. In the first half of this year, there were 7.654 million married women aged 15 to 54, a decrease of 289,000 from last year and 1.19 million from 2019 five years ago. The proportion of married women in the same age group was 57.2% in the first half of this year, a decrease of 4.8% from 2019 (62.0%). (Choi, 2024) These data clearly show that it is not that Korean women are unwilling to enter into marriage, but that there is no fundamental policy or solution for the career support system for married women. In reality, their entry into marriage means that they have also entered into a career development dilemma, so it is not just the economy, living costs and energy investment, but the direct blocking of this potential personal development is an important reason.

Behind South Korea's fertility population data, it is revealed that the younger generation of South Korea has a strong resistance to taking on the responsibility of marriage and childbirth under economic pressure and career uncertainty. And many Korean women are not passively resisting or giving up, but are actively exploring new life paths. As many people have pointed out, discussions on the phenomenon of singleness are often limited to the established narrative of "unmarried young people, divorced middle-aged people, and widowed old people", ignoring the fact that people can "build families" and live in new ways.

As postmodern feminist theorist Angela McRobbie emphasizes, contemporary women are not completely constrained by mainstream social structures and gender norms. Although women appear to be in a passive and negative position, in fact they often fight against these structures through active choices and create new social roles and life meanings of their own. McRobbie points out that traditional narratives of women's empowerment often conceal structural inequalities, but at the same time she emphasizes that this narrative itself also provides potential space for resistance and expression of autonomy. (McRobbie, 2009)

For example, Korean girls may postpone or give up marriage and childbearing, but still actively take action in areas such as interpersonal relationships and personal growth. "Not getting married and not having children" itself is a form of resistance to the traditional social structure, reflecting their determination to choose subjectivization practice under the current economic and social pressures. It can be seen that the "N-po" label emphasizes structural pressure and should not be defined as a passive response under the social structure, but it can easily cover up the efforts and meaning of Korean women's self-empowerment and building their lives.

Therefore, when analyzing the phenomenon of Korean women not getting married and not having children, we must see the dialectical relationship between structural factors and individual choices. Although structural economic pressure and social difficulties have pushed women away from traditional marriage and childbearing patterns to a certain extent, such structural factors cannot fully explain individual subjectivity and proactive practices. On the contrary, it is the subjectivity and positive actions demonstrated by women in the face of structural oppression that make it possible for them to truly break through the shackles of traditional norms and achieve self-reconstruction of identity and empowerment practice. Women's refusal to marry and have children is by no means a simple passive reaction, but should be understood as a kind of active resistance and social practice with a deep postmodern color. Through this behavior of resistance, women not only deconstruct traditional family and gender norms, but also redefine their own identity and life values in practice.

The concept of "N-po" reflects the harsh reality of structural pressure to some extent, but more importantly, it highlights the active exploration and construction of individual subjectivity demonstrated by young Korean women in their daily life practices. This postmodern practice of identity reconstruction, escape and resistance undoubtedly provides important theoretical and practical inspiration for further understanding the interaction between female subjectivity and gender structure.

2.2. Korean women's self-empowerment and gender performance from the perspective of postmodern feminism

From the perspective of postmodern feminism, the "N-po generation" should not be simply seen as "abandoners" but should be understood as a way of escaping traditional norms and resisting patriarchal oppression. Judith Butler once pointed out that gender is not a fixed essence but is constructed through behavior and social interaction. (Fry, 2024) She believes that when women move away from the social framework of male domination, they can break free from the constraints of "naturalized" gender roles. Individual identity is essentially a continuous social practice and performative behavior that is established through the constant repetition of established social norms (Fry, 2024). This idea emphasizes that gender and identity are not fixed, but are formed through repeated social actions and performances. In other words, the subject is decentralized and changeable (Butler, 1990). So people "feel like men or women" not because of innate determination, but because they develop this feeling through repeated actions that conform to gender expectations. At the same time, society has strict gender norms and forces people to behave within gender norms. In short, since social structural power shapes gender subjects through normative discourse, Korean women can counter discipline and reconstruct their subjectivity by rewriting the meaning of their bodies and behaviors in their daily lives.

Therefore, when some Korean women deliberately reject the "outer performance" of traditional femininity, they are actually protesting the established gender order in their own way and recreating new forms of identity. South Korea's "4B Movement" is one of the practices of this concept: the women who follow this movement resolutely refuse to fall in love, get married, have children and have sexual relations. These refusals themselves are a profound social movement. When they break away from the assumptions of traditional gender roles, they avoid all gendered social constructions and create new possibilities for self-definition and self-empowerment through non-compliance. In the postmodern context, this "reverse" performance of gender is of great significance: it reveals the non-essentiality and fluidity of gender identity, while opening up a space for female subjects to act beyond patriarchal restrictions. It challenges the logic behind patriarchy and Confucianism. As Butler argues, women's bodies are not inherently restricted to male-dominated social structures (Butler, 1990). This escape from traditional heterosexual marriage and childbearing norms aims to

break the cultural model that limits women’s identity to wives and mothers, and provide women with a freer space for self-expression (Chun, 2009).

In contemporary Korean society, women respond to and resist mainstream patriarchal norms through a variety of cultural practices, illustrating how gender performance, as described by Butler, becomes a tool of resistance. Many Korean dramas have created anti-traditional female images. For example, the female characters in the hit drama "My Liberation Diary" are based on the theme of "liberation" and resist the society's stereotyped expectations of female roles. In the play, the eldest sister Lian Jizhen has been suffering from the pressure of the "social clock" - the marriage and age anxiety brought about by being unmarried at the age of nearly 40. At first, she spent a lot of money to curl her hair in order to cater to the standards of femininity, hoping to find a marriage partner as soon as possible. She even once said that if she still couldn't get married, she would shave her head to give up the idea. The plot reveals the strict norms of Korean society regarding the marriage age for women, and the efforts women make to play the role of "qualified" women. However, at the end of the play, Lian Jizhen gradually let go of this obsession after a series of encounters: through a conversation with a widowed female friend, she realized that even if she got married, she might end up alone, and that single life does not necessarily mean misfortune. In another scene, a 50-year-old stranger "demystified" her the myth of age - making her understand that the passing of time will not cause drastic changes in people, and there is no need to panic about a certain age in the future. These experiences liberated Lian Jizhen mentally. She was no longer bound by the social script of "must get married before a certain age". The tension in her heart finally relaxed, and she was freed from the heavy shackles that she had been carrying for a long time. The process of this woman in the play breaking free from the constraints of marriage norms through a change of mind is an example of Korean women rebelling against mainstream values through non-normative life choices: she chooses to redefine happiness, no longer regarding marriage as the only goal, but instead gives herself the right to live a leisurely life.

At the same time, Zygmunt Bauman's theory of "liquid modernity" also reveals the non-fixedness and uncertainty of identity in contemporary society. In a mobile society, individual identity is seen as a process of constant construction, and people keep "pedaling" forward, otherwise they will lose their balance. However, contemporary society has shifted from a "heavy and stable" modernity to a "light and flowing" model, and individuals need to constantly reshape themselves in uncertainty. (Bauman, 2000) This means that traditional social role markers, such as occupation, marriage, etc.,

will lose their solidity, and individuals will have more possibilities to redefine their own identity. (Zhang, 2010) In this context, Korean women's escape from traditional paths and rejection of established roles precisely reflect their pursuit of a fluid self. Intuitive resistance practices have emerged in Korean social media and daily life movements. The "decorset" movement that has emerged in recent years is a prominent example: many young Korean women have spontaneously launched actions on the Internet to challenge the norms of perfect appearance. They cut their long hair, did not wear makeup, and publicly discarded expensive and complicated cosmetics in order to refuse to be bound by cumbersome and harsh beauty disciplines (Haas, 2018). These women compared the social pressure to look beautiful to a corset, and thus named the movement "Escape from the Corset" (Kuhn, 2019). Against the backdrop of South Korea's highly developed beauty industry, this practice can be seen as a bold rebellion against mainstream culture. "Decorating" is not only a superficial change in appearance, but also a declaration of women's sovereignty over their own bodies - they no longer let social norms determine their appearance and behavior, but regain control of themselves by reshaping their daily life rituals. It has successfully weakened the mainstream discourse's monopoly on "femininity" and achieved individual empowerment at the practical level.

So what about the self-empowerment of Korean women? In the traditional definition of feminism, empowerment mainly refers to institutional changes or collective movements to improve the status of women, such as social structures and institutions that empower women from top to bottom. Postmodern feminism is more concerned with the subject's construction of consciousness and the recovery of one's own discourse power at the micro level. Because the emphasis on empowerment cannot rely solely on a macro perspective, it needs to be achieved through autonomous choices and cultural expressions in daily life. (Foucault, 1978) Korean female individuals gain power through the improvement of self-awareness and control over their own lives. Its existence process is bottom-up and endogenous.

In the postmodern context, Korean women can empower themselves by understanding and questioning the socio-cultural factors that affect their lives ， e.g.sexism, stereotyped expectations, etc. For example, a woman can choose not to get married or postpone childbearing to focus on personal development, which is an independent life writing that goes against the stereotype that "women's lives can only be centered on the family." For example, by speaking publicly on social media and creating works of art, women can express their true self-demands and thus gain a voice

in the cultural field. This kind of empowerment does not rely on direct support from official policies, but is more reflected in changes in women's own mentality and behavior - they no longer position themselves as passive objects, but actively become the "subjects" of their own lives.

Cultural expression and media participation have created a platform for women to achieve self-empowerment. Korean women have elevated their own experiences to public issues by writing online articles, making video blogs, and participating in online discussions. This kind of self-narrative can not only arouse society's attention to gender inequality, but also enable the narrator to obtain psychological and community support, thereby strengthening his or her sense of subjectivity. The "escape the corset" movement mentioned in the previous section is a process of gaining recognition and power through cultural participation on social media, which embodies the characteristics of empowerment in postmodern society: women do not wait for grand narratives to define their own liberation, but instead construct a new culture of gender equality through specific stories and actions.

Korean women are achieving self-empowerment in the sense of postmodern feminism through the above-mentioned channels: they use the performative nature of gender to break free from shackles and win subjectivity by constantly redefining "how to be a woman". In this process, gender is no longer an other's narrative that weighs on them, but becomes a script that they can write and perform themselves. From rejecting high-intensity makeup and embracing the freedom of bare face, to creating diverse stories belonging to women in literature, film and television, to boldly choosing a life trajectory different from that of their mothers, this series of practices heralds the rise and agency of female subjects. Of course, self-empowerment does not mean that external barriers have been completely eliminated; on the contrary, it is often a space won in the cracks of existing power relations. Therefore, women need to continuously "perform" - as Butler reminds us, subjectivity itself is established through constant repetition. Only then will empowerment not become a fleeting illusion, but a lasting force that truly changes women's lives. The courage and creativity demonstrated by contemporary Korean women provide a vivid commentary on the field of postmodern feminism: while grand structural changes are still a long way off, individual women can still empower themselves through daily practices, reconstruct their identities and resist oppression. This is both a personal revolution and a cumulative social change - the confluence of

countless women's self-empowerment will eventually drive profound and irreversible changes in the landscape of gender equality.

III.The phenomenon of the queer temporality in Korea

1. What is queer temporality?

In societies that generally place individual lives on a linear path of "birth—education—work—marriage—childbearing—old age," there is often an implicit reinforcement of both heteronormativity and capitalist logic. In her groundbreaking work, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Halberstam (2005) introduces the concept of "queer temporality" as a crucial theoretical tool for deconstructing this linear time regime. Conventional "social clocks" typically regard marriage and childbearing as indispensable "markers of progress" in a person's life. Yet, because queer individuals are marginalized or excluded from these norms, they have unexpectedly developed strategies of "horizontal time" and "deferred time," thereby rejecting the societal mandate that ties personal worth to family reproduction or patriarchal productivity.

From Halberstam's perspective, capitalism and heteronormativity jointly forge a "logic of productivity," in which women are expected, by a certain age, to marry and have children to sustain population or social structures. Queer temporality critiques this in three ways. First, it challenges the assumption that "childbearing is the ultimate goal," framing the choice to remain childfree—whether queer or not—as valid rather than "deficient." Second, it identifies practices such as "delaying marriage" or "disruptive migration" as potent methods of resisting the prescriptive social clock. Once a person delays or refuses marriage and motherhood, they effectively undermine socially sanctioned timelines for "marriageable ages." Third, queer temporality acknowledges the legitimacy of non-consanguineous relationships, thereby reframing family beyond "parent–child" binaries. The notion of chosen family thus attains emotional and social significance. However, Halberstam's analysis, which is primarily based on Western post-industrial societies and critiques of the "nuclear family," devotes limited attention to aspects distinctive to Confucian East Asian cultures—such as ancestral rites and clan continuity—a gap that Korean scholars have since worked to address.

In parallel with Halberstam's deconstruction of linear time, Edelman (2004) takes a more radical stance in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, introducing "anti-futurism" to

fundamentally challenge mainstream society's obsession with "the future." From Edelman's point of view, conventional discourses characterize childbearing and children as symbols of "hope," and any refusal to reproduce is seen as an assault on humanity's future. Edelman, however, advocates embracing the present over any obligation to bear children or "live for the future." In feminist terms, this radical perspective poses a dual challenge. On one hand, certain liberal feminist discourses continue to affirm the "marriage–motherhood–professional reintegration" narrative, treating "balancing work and family" as a hallmark of women's success—thereby remaining within a heteronormative temporal framework. On the other hand, low fertility in Korea is frequently labeled a "population crisis" or a threat to "national survival," casting women's bodies as "the womb of the nation" who must reproduce. Edelman's anti-futurism provides a subversive framework for seeing childlessness not only as a personal decision but as a form of political resistance against nationalism's control of reproductive timelines.

Nonetheless, Edelman's notions of "no future" and the "death drive" are not exempt from scrutiny. When Korean women choose to remain single and childless, are they truly seeking to "destroy the future," or are they merely employing a "non-marriage survival strategy" to escape oppressive social structures? In *The Folds of Queer Time in East Asia*, Kim Eli (2018) argues that Western queer theory often overlooks how Confucian traditions impose dual constraints on women in both life and death. In Korean contexts, where "not having children" might serve as an act of present-day resistance, women may still face ostracism during ancestral rites, thus lacking full agency in familial or cultural ceremonies. Another scholar, Jeong Hee-seong, introduces the concept of "compressed temporality" to describe how contemporary Korean women around age 30 encounter multiple "deadlines," including age discrimination in career advancement, social pressures to marry, and national concerns over low birthrates (Cho, 2010). Under these conditions of "compressed modernity," many Korean women make abrupt or "cliff-like" decisions—such as quitting their jobs suddenly, living alone, or emigrating. In an interview with *The Hankyoreh Daily*, one 32-year-old woman in Seoul remarked, "When I tore up my life plan, time finally started to flow" (*The Hankyoreh Daily*, 2022). This statement vividly illustrates the core of queer temporality: once linear time is abandoned, individuals gain the freedom to rename and reinvent their own life trajectories.

Thus, applying Halberstam's and Edelman's theories to the Korean context necessitates a substantive process of cultural adaptation. Conceptions of marriage and childbearing in Korea are intertwined not just with parent-child bonds but also with ancestral rites, clan gatherings, and the veneration of forebears—ethical frameworks that bridge life and death. Even if women avoid the "motherhood penalty" in the workplace, they often find themselves stripped of full family standing in Confucian rituals if they choose not to marry or have children. As Kim Eun-ji (2021) notes, a 40-year-old unmarried woman was rebuked at her father's funeral on the grounds that "without children, she had no right to oversee ancestral rites," epitomizing the invisible but potent hold of Confucian temporality over those who reject reproduction.

In addition to the control of women's life timeline by Confucianism, due to the rapid development of society and economy, a state of crazy compression has emerged in society. The traditional culture of the past is mixed with modern and even postmodern ideas. Local and Western values are constantly trying to connect and innovate, so there will be a lot of social anxiety. The concept of "compressed temporality" proposed by Korean scholar Jeong Hee-seong accurately describes another oppression of people's life timeline in Korean society. Under this compressed state in modern society, Korean women in their thirties will face the superposition of multiple "deadlines": the critical period for career promotion, the end line of the "marriageable age" recognized by society, and the urging of the "optimal childbearing age" from health management. Time is no longer stretched and passed, but a high-pressure node that needs to be vigilant at all times. Every node in life means many cliff-like choices: pursue career or return to family? Missing this node seems to be abandoned forever by the "normal" life track. These nodes are also specific projections of women's life course. Compressed temporality is actually a deprivation of women's power. It makes women feel that they are always passively accepting social changes and so-called traditional expectations. It seems that only by derailing can a bright route from passivity to initiative be realized. Because when a woman decides not to marry and have children, it means that she no longer needs to passively wait for a partner or cater to men's mate selection standards to live. This is the most thorough subversion of "compressed temporality" and a heroic attempt to create her own time zone. This practice coincides with the concept of "queer temporality" in queer theory. She takes the definition and initiative of intimate relationships into her own hands. The traditional marriage system is a path of defined roles, discipline and pressure, and when they decide to become the only masters of their own bodies and life plans, they have begun to take the initiative to liberate themselves.

This initiative is reflected in the re-planning and use of personal time by people in postmodern society. Events that were used for dating, maintaining marriage and raising children in the past can now be used to invest in the self. The fundamental rejection of the logic of building a future family of one's own, non-instrumentalization of one's own life, always falls on the "self". Time is not an enemy that brings anxiety and compresses life, but a resource that can be used creatively. Everyone has his or her own time zone. In his or her own time zone, the definition of success and happiness belongs to him or her to write. Therefore, time, under this system, will become the stretching, broad, and possible river described by Hegel, while "queer temporality" focuses on those life experiences and rhythms that are excluded and marginalized by this set of time norms. Thus, living in the present and living out oneself will be achieved. It praises non-linear and non-reproductive ways of existence such as "derailment", "delay", "mistime" and "no offspring", and regards them as an important resistance strategy.

Queer temporality indeed offers a compelling analytical lens for understanding Korean women's "non-linear" life choices. Nevertheless, to move beyond Western "nuclear-family-centric" constraints, it is necessary to consider the dual pressures of Confucian norms and nationalist discourses on women's reproductive decisions. In other words, Korean women's choices to remain single or childfree within both a capitalist society and a Confucian family system might arise from Edelman's anti-futurism, Halberstam's notion of deferral, or practical considerations (e.g., the financial burden of childrearing), as well as latent political resistance (e.g., rejecting state-driven fertility campaigns).

2. The Reflexion of Queer Temporality in Korean Society

Recent findings from the Korea Women's Research Institute (2022) indicate that 40% of unmarried Korean women "view singlehood as a more fulfilling lifestyle." These respondents actively invest in their careers, artistic pursuits, or personal exploration, thereby replacing the presumed inevitability of marriage and childbearing with individualized growth. Such a trend embodies what Judith Halberstam refers to as "queer temporality," here recontextualized for Korean society: by delaying

or rejecting socially mandated timelines for women, they forge life trajectories marked by diversity and autonomy. Beyond postponing or renouncing marriage, emigration also serves as an effective strategy for Korean women seeking to resist Confucian time constraints. In her study of Korean Canadian communities, Lee Soo-jin (2021) found that 72% of female migrants cited escaping social and familial pressure to marry and have children as a key reason for leaving Korea. Likewise, survey data from the Canadian-Korean Women's Association (2023) reveal that during major holidays, 62% of female respondents chose to travel or socialize locally instead of returning to Korea for obligatory family gatherings. Such transnational mobility not only changes one's geographic coordinates but also disrupts Confucian temporal norms—particularly the expectation to "return home" during holidays—thus enabling women to recalibrate their personal rhythms in a new cultural setting.

In today's digital society, many women also engage in what can be called "temporal poaching": seizing or repurposing spaces outside mainstream time to reconstruct their personal narratives. Under the Instagram hashtag #SoloButHappy (혼자지만행복해), tens of thousands of women post about single-person households, solo travel, and lifestyles that deliberately diverge from conventional marriage pathways. This phenomenon is far more than mere social media exhibition; it is an open defiance of the social clock that insists, "You should be getting married" or "It's time to have children."

Korean women's resistance to traditional timelines also appears in literary and cinematic texts. In Han Kang's novel, *The Vegetarian*, the protagonist, Yeong-hye, becomes a vegetarian in defiance of familial expectations. Though vegetarianism is not inherently synonymous with a queer temporal framework, her refusal of meat parallels a broader refusal of socially imposed temporal norms. At one point, Yeong-hye's father angrily berates her, shouting, "Why are you just standing there? Hurry and eat!" Her continuous abstention from meat derails the family's sense of time, proclaiming her definitive break from patriarchal and Confucian authority. While opting for a queer timeline and adopting an extreme form of refusal may differ in method, both represent a "ruptural" strategy: escaping or suspending the previously dictated course of life to take full control of one's own existential pace.

A similar illustration appears in the film *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*, in which Kim Ji-young's postpartum depression starkly exemplifies women's "time suffocation" within intersecting Confucian and capitalist discourses. She is forced to wake up at dawn to breastfeed, prepare meals for her in-laws by midday, pick up her child after school, and then attend to housework late into the night. Her day is fragmented by the dual roles of mother and daughter-in-law. The film's climax features Kim Ji-young breaking down in a psychiatrist's office, tearfully declaring, "I once wanted to be a writer, but now I don't even have time for a cup of coffee!" This anguish captures the relentless depletion of her time by domestic obligations. Notably, the film's ending shows her returning to writing, seated at a desk late at night, symbolizing her attempt to reclaim ownership of her own time. The close-up of her pen scraping against the paper underscores the resistance to linear time; through the act of writing, she moves from being a mother or wife propelled by external schedules to a self-determined "author" of her own narrative.

In *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang depicts Yeong-hye eventually resorting to a drastic form of fasting that repudiates the Confucian timeline centered on "maternity and nourishment." By halting her bodily functions, she disrupts family expectations of her role. When Yeong-hye's brother-in-law tries to paint flowers on her skin—an attempt to objectify her—she escalates her self-destructive actions to assert that "my body is not the clock that runs your social schedule." As Jeong Hee-seong (2020) explains, her physical stasis compels those around her to confront the violence of patriarchal temporal discipline.

Whether Kim Ji-young's story of writing or Yeong-hye's act of fasting, both highlight how women confront socially mandated timelines through "physical or psychological disruption." The former regains time through self-reclamation, while the latter chooses a path of self-destruction or silence. Yet each illustrates that once a woman opts out of constant burdens like marriage, motherhood, and childcare, she finds room to create the "horizontal" or "deferred" aspects of queer time.

Korean women's manifestations of "queer temporality" thus transcend LGBTQ+ contexts and differ from the assumptions of Western theoretical models. Operating under ostensibly "non-queer" or "heterosexual" identities, they enact some of the most radical forms of temporal resistance. From singlehood and migration to alternative digital communities and literary portrayals of familial strife, their collective efforts point to a unifying theme: how women can break free from compressed or

segmented life courses and instead assert sovereignty over their own time. Sociologist Kim Eli (2021) notes that when women declare, “My time does not belong to patriarchy or family reproduction,” they simultaneously dismantle a heteronormative-capitalist complex that has long treated women’s bodies as reproductive vessels. In Confucian East Asian societies, time is not merely a personal resource but also carries the weight of familial, national, and even ethnic expectations. Consequently, women’s defiance of such temporal dictates is often deemed “selfish” or “a betrayal of tradition.” Yet, by dismantling a centuries-old “temporal empire,” they pave the way for a more inclusive and flexible gender order.

Within this process, individuals and collectives, reality and virtual spaces, bodies and narrative forms intersect to shape the diverse practices of queer temporality among Korean women. Whether by rejecting marriage, emigrating, sharing “single daily life” online, or deploying extreme bodily acts in literature, they challenge the idea that time must be linear and lives must follow a narrow superhighway of milestones. Their pursuit is not merely “freedom from marriage and childbearing,” but the agency to determine how, where, and under what conditions life unfolds. As a result, Korean women’s queer temporality holds revolutionary potential for redefining both individual identities and broader social relationships.

2.1. In the public sector

When Korean women choose to remain single and childfree, they often find themselves resisting two dominant systems simultaneously. First, there is the Confucian patrilineal emphasis on intergenerational responsibility—women are expected to bear male heirs to continue the linear timeline of “ancestors–self–descendants.” According to recent statistics, by 2023, the proportion of childless households in Korea reached 42% (통계청), indicating that more and more women are deliberately severing the chains of ancestral rites and familial lineage. Confucian temporality is centered on “ancestral-rite cycles” (제사 주기) and “intergenerational duties” (세대 간 의무), which confines women to perpetuating the family line, caring for the elderly, and venerating ancestors in a never-ending loop. During traditional holidays, such as Seollal (Lunar New Year) and Chuseok (Mid-Autumn Festival), the women in the household typically perform substantial preparatory tasks for family rituals—pouring much of their personal time into these so-called “filial

piety" obligations. Yet, a growing number of young women opt out of these practices to undermine the system.

In 2022, an event referred to as a "rite strike" (제사 파업) in Seoul gained substantial attention. A 30-year-old woman posted anonymously on an online forum, announcing her refusal to prepare holiday dishes for Chuseok, detailing how the burden of "rite labor" had long deprived her of rest and self-directed time (*The Hankyoreh Daily*, 2022). Within a mere three days, thousands of online users signed a petition in her support, asserting that they were "tired of sacrificing nights and weekends just to be labeled a 'good daughter-in-law.'" This rite strike not only challenged familial hierarchies but also took aim directly at Confucian temporality itself—time should not belong solely to one's ancestors or to procreation; it should primarily belong to the individual.

Second, within feminist discourse, the "working mother" narrative dominates liberal feminism, idealizing "balancing work and family" as the pinnacle of success. It tacitly assumes that women will, at a certain stage, be able to "manage" both childbearing and a professional career. Yet, the "horizontal existence" advocated by queer temporality rejects the automatic inclusion of one's life within a single reproductive or professional trajectory (Halberstam, 2005). For Korean women, this horizontal mode often manifests in extended singlehood, artistic experimentation, or even emigration. According to a 2023 study from the Korean Institute for Gender Equality, only 18% of Korean women under 40 are willing to sacrifice their careers for children—down from 89% among the previous generation—highlighting a generational rupture in how women view marriage and motherhood. In a society that prizes the Confucian dictum of "a mother's worth lies in her sons," this precipitous decline suggests a broad social consensus challenging the traditional linkage of "childbearing–ancestral rites."

The Korean television drama *My Liberation Notes* offers a striking cultural metaphor in this regard. The main female character, beset by familial and social expectations to wed, chooses a life that appears stalled or stagnant: she neither rushes into romantic relationships nor actively pursues marriage, exhibiting uncertainty and fatigue about her future. Although this stance might look "passive," it hints at a dismantling of the "social clock" and a process of self-empowerment. As the characters often reference "liberation," they are not referring solely to financial or social freedom; they are resisting a linear life narrative. In other words, the protagonist's "stagnation" epitomizes the

embodiment of queer temporality in the context of Korean dramas—she declines to validate her worth through the culturally scripted checkpoints of graduation, employment, marriage, and motherhood. Instead, she navigates an almost "swamp-like" realm of time in search of new meaning.

These temporal revolutions among Korean women neither blindly imitate Western individualism nor simply negate Confucian tradition; rather, they emerge as innovative, localized practices. Positioned between two systems of temporal discipline—Confucian lineage ("ancestors–descendants") and liberal feminist calls for "balancing motherhood"—they chart a third path, exemplifying a more radical and flexible queer temporality. On one side, practices like "rite strikes" and "not marrying or having children" free women from the burdens of Confucian timelines, allowing them to escape intergenerational obligations. On the other, critiques of liberal feminism underscore the underlying assumption that women must somehow "innately manage it all," even within calls for gender equality. Only by dismantling both layers of structural constraints can women truly gain autonomy over how they allocate their time and determine the pace of their lives.

2.2. In the private sector

In exploring how women's queer temporalities manifest in Korean society, one cannot ignore the profound impact that Korean women exhibit in their private spheres—namely, their residences, emotions, bodily practices, and sense of self-time. Compared to the institutional constraints and visible social movements that may be present in the public sphere, the temporal nature of life in the private sphere is often more hidden, and in their personal lives, these women are actively decoupling their identities and futures from traditional femininity defined by marriage and motherhood. They are postponing these milestones, making a fully conscious choice to forgo them, or reimagine them on their own terms. Social pressures to conform remain strong, and in the private sphere, resistance to these pressures is growing.

Coping with this social environment requires a lot of emotional labor and strategic coping mechanisms. Women may carefully construct narratives that explain their choices, selectively share information about their personal lives, or actively seek out supportive communities and individuals

who support their decisions. More and more Korean women choose to live alone or share a house with other women, trying to live a de-familyed life. cnnews.chosun.com reported that a female-share house designed for seven single women has appeared in Seoul, indicating that the single-share house trend popular in Japan has taken off in South Korea. Statistics also show that the proportion of single-person households in South Korea has increased rapidly, accounting for about 25.3% of total households in 2024. cnnews.chosun.com, and the trend of women voluntarily staying in single apartments or renting small apartments has increased significantly. At the same time, although living alone brings the "pain of living alone", it also creates the "happiness of living alone". Some cultural terms that specifically emphasize the positive aspects of being alone (such as Honjok, Bihon, and non-marriageism) reflect the life attitude of young people who are confident and willing to participate in activities alone "regardless of other people's opinions" (Choe, 2022). These living styles do not rely on the traditional family model, and provide women with more possibilities to arrange their time and space independently, so that their pace of life is not restricted by the timing of marriage and childbirth.

On the emotional level, some women take the initiative to build non-marital intimate networks to reduce their dependence on opposite-sex partners. They generally believe that heterosexual relationships often bring oppression and danger. They allegedly "keep hearing news about women being treated violently while dating, or even murdered when they try to end relationships." Therefore, they reject intimate relationships based on love and marriage. These women rely more on emotional support systems such as close friends, like-minded female groups or pets to build an emotional network that is not centered on men. For example, some Korean women held a "non-wedding" ceremony to celebrate their self-growth. A 32-year-old Zhao Zhixuan wore a gray suit and declared to 40 guests: "I promise to love myself forever." She also ridiculed marriage as "a gift package vacation package that does not meet my wishes" (Natsume, 2025). Such practices show that even if they do not identify themselves as queer, these women express value orientations that are completely different from traditional heterosexual time sequences through intimate relationships and rituals in the private sphere.

IV. Conclusion: A shared dilemma with East Asian women

The profound identity reshaping, individual struggle and challenge to the traditional timeline experienced by Korean women in the process of interweaving, colliding and integrating Confucian culture and Western feminist thought is not an isolated phenomenon limited to South Korea. At the same time, it also exists in other East Asian countries, related to the similar dilemmas and exploration of new life faced by women in other countries and regions in the region, and they also exist in describing their own new narratives. Confucian culture has an important influence on the entire East Asian region, mainly including China, Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam and Singapore. These countries share some of the ideological resources of Confucian culture, such as its core concepts such as emphasizing the central position of family ethics, maintaining a very clear social order, and a stubborn gender division of labor system. Therefore, Confucianism has continued to shape the basic structure of East Asian society, the relationship between people and the deeper cultural psychology in these countries in history and to varying degrees. Although each country has very different local development and performance in its own development path, economic level, political system, etc., women in each country have the contradiction and tension between traditional gender norms and modern society. They are constantly pursuing individual autonomy. Women in each country encounter structural obstacles and resistance from cultural ideas such as Confucianism on the road to gender equality and personal development. Therefore, they have common points and points of comparison when facing the life choice of whether to enter a non-traditional timeline.

First of all, women in East Asian countries usually face a common difficulty, that is, the role within the family and the pressure of society. This is not a simple multiple burden, but a way to get their own real life from inside to outside. Like Japan and China, women need to play the role of a good wife and mother or a filial daughter-in-law in the family under gender norms, taking care of children and the elderly and doing housework that men don’t want to undertake. On the other hand, with the development of the economy, they have improved their education level. Especially in China, since the government and the Communist Party implemented and promoted the one-child policy in 1979, many families have only one daughter, so the family's expectations for their children, emotional and time investment, and economic investment will only be placed on one daughter. Daughters have become the only hope for the continuation of the family. Parents may transfer the Confucian traditional expectations for sons to daughters, thereby improving the development status of daughters in terms of growth, education and career path in real society. In

this way, daughters in single-daughter families will be encouraged to participate in social and educational competitions, and gain personal career development and economic independence in their continuous growth. Therefore, they were born in China during this period and were the only hope and focus of the entire family. Their parents' expectations became very high, which may lead to huge academic, career and marriage and childbearing pressures, and their personal life choices became narrow. Because the tolerance rate became low, any life plan that deviated slightly from the traditional path would be magnified into a failed move. Therefore, marriage and childbearing have become very important decisions for China's only daughters. They not only know the sacrifices and heavy costs of personal life in the married state, but also the urging and confusion of parents and relatives and friends about their non-traditional timeline in the unmarried state. So it is particularly difficult for them to enter the queer timeline. But for some large cities in China, such as Shanghai and Beijing, women in these cities have already developed a high sense of subjectivity like Korean women, and have begun to develop women's activities and ideas, using their own lives as a method to explore a path of their own in the wilderness.

This expectation of "super women" who are both "domestic" and "external" in East Asian society has made many East Asian women feel physically and mentally exhausted and unable to balance the delicate relationship between work and family. Since the Meiji period, Japan has had traditional expectations for women to have the role of a good wife and a wise mother, ryōsai kenbo. Although this has changed in modern times, married women are always emphasized to have the primary responsibility of taking care of the small unit of the family and raising and educating their children. Therefore, the maternal punishment and the glass ceiling of women's careers are very significant. When Japanese women want to develop in the workplace after marriage and childbirth, they will have a strong conflict with social expectations. So a problem has arisen, that is, maternity harassment.

This is discriminatory behavior that exists in the social structure of Japan. It is not an individual act, but a bullying of pregnant women or new mothers by the entire Japanese society. Through various unreasonable workplace channels, these women are forced to compromise their career development and are subjected to mental bullying until they quit the workplace. As scholars Cortright and Weathers pointed out: "Matahara—a concatenation of the English words 'maternity' and 'harassment'—refers to a range of discriminatory behaviors that disadvantage pregnant women and

new mothers in the workplace." (Cortright & Weathers, 2018) This passage points out that the essence of its existence is discriminatory behavior against married women with children. When married women with children bear huge structural pressures and difficulties in the workplace, they continue to move closer to the small society of the family, their potential in life is restricted, and they cannot enjoy the most basic gender equality.

Secondly, in the entire East Asian social system, heterosexual marriage is the absolute core family value. Although it has been challenged by the younger generation, these are all guided to the traditional timeline under the political system. For example, parents and older relatives, or the direction of public opinion and policy in society will be more inclined to the construction of traditional families. When faced with the situation of urging marriage and childbirth, women in East Asian society will have corresponding cultural ideas to resist it. For example, in Japanese society, women who marry late, have children late, or do not marry are labeled as "*bad dogs*" (makeinu, defeated dogs), and in Chinese society, so-called "old unmarried young women" are often stigmatized as "*leftover women*", meaning leftover women, so these labels are pointing to East Asian women who do not move towards the traditional timeline. However, more and more East Asian women have also realized that this is the oppression imposed on them by the entire East Asian society to join the tradition. This cultural expectation that women can enter the state of marriage and childbirth is consistent with the pressure and labor consumption that Korean women suffer when participating in family sacrifices, gatherings or social ceremonies in gendered labor divisions mentioned in this study.

Finally, although feminism or women's rights movements in different countries have different development and historical core issues, they are still constantly fighting and playing games with the ubiquitous patriarchal society. Because they face similar structural and cultural dilemmas and challenges, women in East Asian countries are not always passively succumbing or accepting. They are constantly exploring and realizing individual empowerment paths that suit themselves or the present. For example, the spread of "*non-marriageism*" in Japanese society and the rise and acceptance of the "*ohitorisama*" (enjoying single life) lifestyle; the growing emphasis and pursuit of personal independence, career achievement and quality of life among Chinese urban women, as

well as the questioning and reflection on traditional views on marriage and love; East Asian women, under the constraints of traditional cultural customs and the complex tension of modern social development, strive to seek self-liberation, realize individual values, and expand their living space through diverse attempts and unremitting efforts.

Correspondingly, the influx of Western feminist thought and its continued fermentation in East Asian society have provided East Asian women with sharp ideological weapons and diverse action guidelines to criticize tradition, deconstruct patriarchy, and fight for their own rights. Since the second half of the 20th century, the feminist movement in many East Asian countries has gone through a process from the early focus on gender equality before the law and fighting for equal education and employment opportunities, to the mid-term in-depth exploration of gender power relations and challenges to gender inequality within the family, to the recent focus on more radical and diverse issues such as bodily autonomy, opposition to sexual violence, deconstruction of gender stereotypes, and challenges to the ubiquitous patriarchal culture, showing a magnificent development picture.

Many of these feminist thought collections are not only the collective, strategic and radical reflection and resolute resistance of young East Asian women to the traditional marriage and family system and the mandatory fertility expectations, but also their attempt to fundamentally break away from the patriarchal society's control over women's bodies, time and future choices, and regain the dominance of life. Escape, resistance and self-empowerment constitute the key action logic and core narrative of many contemporary East Asian women who do not marry or have children in order to reshape their identity and strive for individual autonomy in a complex social and cultural context.

They escape the oppression and constraints that may be brought about by the traditional family model and get rid of the heavy shackles of gender role expectations by making decisions not to marry or have children; they resist the ubiquitous patriarchal culture, gender discrimination and the resulting social injustice through diversified and sometimes even radical collective actions and individual practices such as the feminist movement; they continue to "empower" themselves and enhance their self-worth and social competitiveness by actively pursuing higher education, deepening their career development, expanding their personal interests, building independent living spaces and a diverse social support network. It must be admitted that this process of identity

reshaping and struggle is by no means a smooth journey. They still face the strong inertia of traditional family concepts, the prejudice and misunderstanding of social public opinion, and even the attacks and challenges of emerging anti-feminist trends. However, their actions are undoubtedly profoundly shaking and changing the gender power structure and dynamic balance in East Asian society in an unprecedented way, and are strongly promoting the popularization, deepening and practice of gender equality concepts in East Asian society. Their long-term impact deserves continued attention and in-depth research.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the life choices and cultural implications of Korean women who do not marry or have children, this study introduces the Queer Temporality theory and Judith Bulter's gender performativity theory as an analytical framework. This theory emphasizes the criticism of the linear life course view centered on reproduction and heterosexual norms, and focuses on "non-normative" life practices that deviate from, delay or reject key time nodes in the traditional life cycle (such as studying-working-marrying-childbearing-retirement). There is also no "inner" gender core or "real" gender identity that precedes social and cultural expression. The "inner" gender sense we feel is itself formed in the process of social interaction and gender performance. Therefore, women and men are shaped by various social mechanisms, education, family, media, etc. into their own gender roles, and enforce the binary gender norms under heterosexual hegemony.

The study found that Korean women who do not marry or have children actively deconstruct the "standard timetable" set by mainstream society by consciously delaying or even completely rejecting marriage and childbirth, two crucial nodes in the "standard" life stage in both traditional Confucian society and modern society, and on this basis, they build a life rhythm and life trajectory that is exclusive to individuals and more flexible and autonomous. This strategy of "time resistance" is not only clearly reflected in collective actions in the public sphere, such as some women resisting gender inequality in traditional family rituals in the form of "sacrificial strikes"; it also penetrates more deeply into lifestyle choices in the private sphere, such as embracing single life, developing non-marital intimate relationships, such as cohabitation, companionship for the elderly, and building a community support network beyond blood ties. These practices are not only a powerful challenge to the Confucian time order centered on blood continuation and family reproduction, but also differ from the narrative advocated by some mainstream liberal feminism that seeks "work-

family balance" within the established framework, showing a more thorough subversion and creativity.

In summary, this paper's in-depth analysis of Korean women's identity reconstruction and individual non-traditional life experience can be regarded as a vivid epitome of the common historical dilemma, collective anxiety and pioneering exploration faced by women in the entire East Asian region in the process of postmodernization and globalization. In the process of continuous dialogue, fierce collision and even creative integration between the gender hierarchy order shaped by traditional Confucian culture and the concept of equal liberation advocated by modern Western feminism, women in East Asian countries are trying to break the gender stereotypes and role expectations imposed on themselves in their own ways, actively challenging and trying to reshape the unequal social gender structure and power relations, in order to strive for a broader space for personal autonomous development and more substantial gender equality rights.

Therefore, the systematic study of the phenomenon of Korean women's non-marriage and childlessness and the complex motivations behind it is not only limited to Korea, but also can provide us with valuable theoretical references and empirical inspirations for understanding and grasping the changes in the social status of women in the entire East Asian region, the awakening of rights awareness and future development trends. Future research can and should further expand the comparative perspective. For example, through cross-national and cross-cultural comparative analysis methods, we can deeply examine the differentiated coping strategies, discourse construction, and cultural adaptation patterns adopted by women in East Asian countries when facing similar structural dilemmas (such as low fertility, aging, marriage and childbearing pressure, etc.), so as to more comprehensively and deeply understand the unique gender dynamic evolution logic in East Asia, the multiple paths of women's empowerment process, and the common challenges and future opportunities they face. This will not only help deepen our academic understanding of gender issues in East Asian society, but also provide insightful policy recommendations and practical inspiration for promoting the sustainable development of gender equality in the region.

Therefore, the core of this paper is that although the dominant position of Confucian philosophical thought system in the public sphere has significantly declined under the impact of the

modernization and globalization of Korean society, its influence in the private sphere, especially in the core areas related to family structure, intergenerational relations, ritual practice and even the meaning of individual life, is still intertwined, and continues to exert invisible but powerful discipline and pressure on women. In the grand background of the rise and fall of the deep-rooted Confucian cultural tradition in Korea and the surging feminist trend, especially in the social structure with the family as the unit, women will be bound by a constant stream of housework and emotional labor, and a cultural framework based on the family as the core and gender division of labor has been constructed. Under this framework, married women are often expected or even forced to bear a disproportionate amount of housework, childcare responsibilities and emotional labor to maintain family harmony. This role template of "good wife and good mother" makes marriage no longer an ideal destination for a happy life in the eyes of a considerable number of modern women with independent consciousness, but alienated into a heavy shackle and endless responsibility that may devour personal space and hinder self-realization.

The individual identity of Korean women has undergone a complex and profound reshaping process. This paper focuses on why Korean women choose not to marry or have children. Their life practices and action trajectories with escape, resistance and self-empowerment as the core logic are not only a subversive challenge to traditional gender norms, but also a positive exploration and redefinition of the meaning and value of individual existence through the postmodern "queer timeline". This has caused many women, especially those intellectual women who have career aspirations and are eager to achieve economic independence and personal value, to have a deep hesitation or even resistance to marriage and childbearing behavior, thus facing unique dilemmas, coping strategies and life paths on the queer timeline in the face of multiple cultural tensions and social structural contradictions.

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