Searchings for the “Modern Wife” in Prewar Shanghai and Seoul Magazines

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Who is a “modern wife”? How does one envision a Chinese or Korean wife in the 1930s? Does one imagine an ultrafashionable young lady wearing an apron, a tired, middle-aged mother soothing her crying baby, or a pleasure-seeking woman neglecting her responsibilities to her family?

In issue 101 (1935) of Liangyou, a newly married wife joyfully introduces her daily life (fig. 8.1). Her morning begins with cleaning her husband’s office and arranging flowers. After lunch, she starts to think about dinner and decides to try a new foreign-style dish, imagining her husband’s happy face. Having prepared dinner by 3 p.m., she reads a foreign-language magazine for a few hours while she waits for her husband’s return. Finally, she welcomes him with a big smile and soothing words, guides him to a comfortable sofa near the fireplace, and asks “What do you want to listen to, dear?” “Maybe Chopin?” her husband answers. On weekends, they go shopping together and watch such movies as Island of Pleasure. In this two-page spread, the wife is happy to be a professional manager of a modern home and a beloved wife.

Like this young Chinese woman, a Korean wife prepares a meal for her husband in an Ajinomi food supplement advertisement in the December 1935 issue of Samcheolli (Three Thousand Li) (fig. 8.2). Wearing an older-style hanbok, she is proudly showing Ajinomi to her husband. Right beside her, the husband, clad in a suit, is expressing his satisfaction with a genuine smile.

These images were produced in 1930s Shanghai and Gyeongseong (today’s Seoul), when modernity was coming into full swing. In these two uniquely modern cities of China and Korea, the initial shock of modernity had gradually faded away. Residents had become accustomed to using electricity, trams, and cars; foreign residents of these two cities did not encounter “strange” and exotic phenomena anymore. In Shanghai, the urban cityscape was under construction, cinemas flourished, and dance halls functioned as popular leisure time venues. In Gyeongseong, department stores, cafeterias, and Western-style architecture started to appear in both “traditional Bukchon” (North village) and “modern Namchon” (South village).

While the modernity of the two cities had been evolving over time, citizens also matured. The “modern girl” in the 1910s and 1920s was not a girl any more. Young women who had obtained a modern education, dressed dazzlingly, strolled the boulevards, and freely enjoyed single life were now old enough to get married and have babies. The time to draw an accurate picture of the modern wife and to define her proper roles at home had arrived; serious debates about the modern wife were underway.

In this chapter, I trace the endeavors of Shanghai and Gyeongseong residents as they searched for the modern dream wife. I emphasize images from Liangyou and Samcheolli, two remarkable magazines widely circulated in the two cities. These magazines include illustrations and photographs that try to explain the nature of modernity and advertisements that sold modernity by putting model wives on display. I then analyze the characteristics embodied by these wives. This process helps us better understand how the people of Shanghai and Gyeongseong imagined a modern wife in those rapidly developing urban spaces in the 1930s.

I also compare and contrast images of the modern wife in Shanghai and Gyeongseong to sharpen our understanding of the varieties of modernity one finds in East Asia. Although previous scholarship has revealed differences between modernity in “Euro-America” and “Asia,” thus correcting the misconception of a superior West and an inferior Asia in the modern era, such comparisons have often resulted in essentialist pictures of the “West” and the “East.” I argue, however, there is no such thing as West or East. Of course, we need to allow