

The History of Women's Development in Colonial Regions (Hong Kong and South Korea)

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Abstract: This article adopts a postcolonial feminist perspective to examine the development of feminism in South Korea and Hong Kong between 2000 and 2015. Situating both cases within the context of colonial legacies and contemporary political transformations, the study analyzes how feminist movements emerged and evolved under different political and social conditions. In South Korea, feminism advanced certain policy reforms through engagement with state institutions, while simultaneously encountering strong backlash from conservative political forces. In contrast, feminism in Hong Kong was more closely connected with grassroots social movements, labor rights advocacy, and pro-democracy mobilization, yet it often remained marginal within the broader political agenda. Through comparative analysis, this article highlights both the similarities and divergences in the trajectories of feminist development in the two societies, and shows how global feminist ideas have been localized and translated within distinct historical and cultural contexts. The study argues that in postcolonial societies, feminism is continually negotiated and reconfigured between global discourses and local realities. By doing so, this research contributes to the theoretical development of postcolonial feminist studies and offers a new perspective for understanding the evolution of gender politics in East Asia.

Keywords: post-colonial feminism; South Korea; Hong Kong; feminist; movements; localization and translation; gender politics

1. Introduction

In the global development of Feminism, colonial experience has played an essential role in the awakening and resistance of women's consciousness in non-Western societies. Unlike Western Feminism, which centers on gender equality, colonial Feminism often arises from the context of multiple oppressions. Its development is shaped not only by the patriarchal system but also deeply influenced by colonial regimes and nationalist narratives. During the 2000–2015 period, feminism in South Korea and Hong Kong became increasingly defined by their unique political environments. These regions demonstrate how local women's struggles intersect with cultural, political, and social structures, reflecting a complex process of feminist thought continuously reconstructed, marginalized, and often instrumentalized within colonial discourse and the construction of modernity.

This study aims to explore how colonial rule influenced the rise and evolution of Feminism in South Korea and Hong Kong from 2000 to 2015, revealing the challenges and tensions faced by Feminism during its localization in different political contexts. This period saw distinct political climates in both regions, including

the consolidation of right-wing political movements in South Korea, which impacted feminist discourse, and the political shifts in Hong Kong post-1997, where nationalist and pro-democracy narratives became central to feminist movements.

By comparing the similarities and differences in the development paths and core issues of Feminism in these two regions between 2000 and 2015, the paper will focus on the following key questions [1–3]:

1. How did colonial experiences influence the development trajectories of Feminism in South Korea and Hong Kong between 2000 and 2015?
2. How did right-wing political movements in South Korea and nationalist discourse in Hong Kong shape feminist ideologies during this period?
3. How did modern Feminism undergo localization, translation and reflection in these post-colonial societies from 2000 to 2015?

2. Theoretical Framework

To analyze the development of Feminism in South Korea and Hong Kong between 2000 and 2015, this study draws on the theoretical framework of post-colonial Feminism. Scholars such as Chandra Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak have critiqued the universalization of Western feminist narratives, emphasizing the importance of historical and cultural specificity in understanding women’s oppression. Post-colonial Feminism focuses on how colonial histories intersect with gender, class, and race to shape the lived experiences of women in formerly colonized regions. It highlights the ways in which Feminist movements in non-Western societies are often shaped by both local patriarchal norms and the lingering structures of colonial power.

A crucial concept within this framework is the “localization” and “translation” of Feminist discourses. Rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all approach, post-colonial Feminists argue that global Feminist ideas—such as gender equality, bodily autonomy, and empowerment—must be adapted to local contexts in ways that acknowledge historical, cultural, and political differences. These processes of translation are not neutral or seamless; they often involve contestation and resistance. In the context of South Korea and Hong Kong, this means understanding how Feminism is reshaped within societies where colonial ideologies, nationalist sentiments, and modern global influences coexist and sometimes clash. This framework allows us to critically examine how Feminist movements in the two regions emerged, evolved, and responded to both internal and external pressures during the 2000–2015 period.

Between 2000 and 2015, South Korea and Hong Kong experienced significant political developments that shaped the trajectory of local Feminist movements. In South Korea, the early 2000s marked a period of democratic consolidation, but also a resurgence of conservative politics. The administrations of Lee Myung-bak (2008 – 2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013 – 2017) were characterized by neoliberal economic reforms, reinforcement of traditional family values, and a backlash against progressive civil society organizations, including Feminist groups. These right-wing political shifts challenged Feminist agendas by prioritizing economic growth and national security over gender equality, often framing Feminist demands as disruptive or unpatriotic. At the same time, long-standing patriarchal norms continued to restrict women’s participation in politics, labor, and public discourse.

In Hong Kong, the post-handover period saw increasing political tensions, particularly around the issues of autonomy, identity, and democratization. After the 1997 return to Chinese sovereignty, the region struggled to maintain its civil liberties under the “One Country, Two Systems” framework. Feminist movements in Hong Kong had to navigate a highly polarized environment, where pro-democracy and pro-Beijing forces competed for influence. Nationalist and anti-colonial discourses often sidelined Feminist concerns, portraying them as secondary to the larger struggle for political rights. However, women’s groups played active roles in social movements, including labor rights advocacy and, later, participation in the 2014 Umbrella Movement. These political contexts, though distinct, created similar challenges for Feminist activism: in both regions, Feminism had to assert itself against dominant narratives that either ignored or deliberately marginalized gender issues.

3. Feminist Movements and Development (2000–2015)

3.1. South Korea

Between 2000 and 2015, South Korea's Feminist movement experienced both unprecedented opportunities and significant resistance. The country's democratization in the late twentieth century provided a foundation for civic engagement, allowing organizations such as the Korean Women's Association United (KWAU) and the Korean Women's Development Institute (KWDI) to expand their influence. Feminist activists successfully pushed for the revision of the Sexual Violence Punishment Act, strengthened laws on domestic violence, and improvements in maternity and childcare policies. These achievements reflected Feminism's capacity to mobilize within formal political structures.

However, the political climate became increasingly challenging during the administrations of Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013–2017). Both governments emphasized neoliberal reforms and family-centered welfare policies, which implicitly reinforced traditional gender roles and marginalized Feminist concerns. For example, policies that encouraged women to leave the workforce after childbirth framed women primarily as mothers and caregivers, undermining hard-won gains in workplace equality [4]. Furthermore, public discourse often positioned Feminism as a threat to social cohesion, with critics accusing Feminist groups of promoting "anti-family" or "anti-national" agendas.

Despite these obstacles, grassroots mobilizations reflected the resilience of South Korean Feminism. Campaigns such as the protests against sexual harassment in universities and workplaces in the early 2010s, and the advocacy for women's representation in politics, demonstrated growing public engagement. These efforts laid the groundwork for the more visible #MeToo movement that emerged after 2015. Thus, during 2000–2015, South Korean Feminism was simultaneously institutionalized and contested, gaining partial victories while also confronting entrenched patriarchal and conservative forces.

3.2. Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, Feminism developed along a different trajectory, shaped by the city's colonial legal heritage and the post-handover political order. Women's organizations such as the Association for the Advancement of Feminism (AAF) and the Hong Kong Women Workers' Association played crucial roles in addressing issues often overlooked by mainstream politics. Migrant domestic workers—primarily women from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand—were at the center of Feminist activism, as they faced exploitative working conditions, discriminatory laws such as the "two-week rule," and social stigmatization [5]. Feminist groups worked alongside labor NGOs to challenge these structures, framing migrant rights as both a gender and human rights issue.

At the legislative level, Feminists advocated for stronger anti-discrimination protections and the expansion of gender equality policies. The Sex Discrimination Ordinance, enacted in the late 1990s, was subject to amendments and reinterpretations in the 2000s, partly due to sustained advocacy by women's groups. Feminists also addressed broader social concerns such as housing inequality, poverty, and access to healthcare, demonstrating that their activism was deeply embedded in Hong Kong's wider struggles for social justice.

By the 2010s, Feminist participation in large-scale social movements became increasingly visible. During the 2014 Umbrella Movement, women activists not only joined protests in significant numbers but also organized logistical support and provided critical voices on issues of representation and inclusivity within the movement [6,7]. However, the male-dominated leadership of the movement often sidelined explicitly Feminist concerns, reinforcing the perception that gender equality was a secondary issue compared to the broader fight for democracy. This tension reflected a recurring challenge for Hong Kong Feminism: how to assert its own agenda within a political landscape dominated by struggles over sovereignty and autonomy.

Thus, between 2000 and 2015, Feminism in Hong Kong operated largely at the grassroots level, building alliances across labor, migrant, and pro-democracy struggles. Its strength lay in its ability to mobilize marginalized voices, but its influence was constrained by the overwhelming weight of identity politics and the broader confrontation between Hong Kong and Beijing.

4. Localization and Translation of Feminist Ideas

The development of Feminism in South Korea and Hong Kong between 2000 and 2015 was deeply influenced by the processes of localization and translation. Global Feminist concepts—such as “gender mainstreaming,” “empowerment,” and “bodily autonomy”—were not simply adopted wholesale, but were reframed to align with local socio-cultural contexts. In South Korea, Feminist activists often drew on Confucian notions of social harmony to frame gender equality as beneficial for national development, thereby increasing the acceptability of Feminist agendas in a conservative society [4]. This strategic translation allowed Feminism to gain partial legitimacy in policy debates, even if it risked diluting more radical critiques of patriarchy.

In Hong Kong, localization was shaped by its colonial legal heritage and post-handover identity politics. Feminist NGOs used the language of international human rights law, particularly CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women), to pressure both the Hong Kong government and Beijing for policy reforms [3]. However, the translation process was complicated by the fact that global Feminist narratives sometimes clashed with local priorities, such as the defense of civil liberties and political autonomy. As a result, Feminism often had to position itself in relation to nationalist and anti-colonial movements, leading to selective adoption of international discourses.

5. Comparative Analysis

The Feminist trajectories of South Korea and Hong Kong between 2000 and 2015 reveal both notable parallels and striking divergences. On the one hand, both movements were deeply shaped by colonial legacies and post-colonial political contexts that marginalized gender issues. In each society, Feminism was often subordinated to dominant political agendas: in South Korea, national security, economic growth, and conservative family policies frequently took precedence, while in Hong Kong, the struggle over autonomy and democratization overshadowed gender equality. In both cases, activists faced accusations that Feminist demands were divisive or irrelevant, a reminder of the persistent difficulty of mainstreaming gender concerns in patriarchal and politically polarized environments.

Another commonality lies in the tension between global Feminist discourses and local political realities. In both South Korea and Hong Kong, concepts such as gender mainstreaming and empowerment were translated into locally acceptable terms. South Korean Feminists, for example, framed equality in ways that resonated with national development goals, while Hong Kong activists appealed to international human rights frameworks such as CEDAW to legitimize their claims. These strategies demonstrate the adaptability of Feminist movements, but also reveal the compromises required for political survival in conservative or contested spaces.

Despite these shared dynamics, the two movements also diverged in their modes of engagement and sources of influence. South Korea’s Feminism was more institutionally oriented, benefiting from its ability to interact with government agencies and legal systems. This enabled policy reforms but also exposed the movement to political backlash whenever conservative administrations held power. Hong Kong’s Feminism, by contrast, was rooted more firmly in grassroots activism, with strong connections to labor rights, migrant worker organizations, and pro-democracy movements. While this approach allowed Hong Kong Feminism to mobilize marginalized voices and maintain independence from the state, it limited its ability to achieve consistent institutional reforms.

A further difference concerns the ideological challenges each movement faced. South Korean Feminism struggled against a rising conservative nationalism that reasserted patriarchal family norms and questioned the legitimacy of Feminist demands. In Hong Kong, however, the Feminist movement confronted the overshadowing of gender by identity politics, as both pro-democracy and pro-Beijing camps tended to treat gender issues as secondary to sovereignty disputes. This divergence underscores how different political conditions produce distinct pressures: where South Korean Feminism was constrained by domestic conservatism, Hong Kong Feminism was marginalized by geopolitical contestation.

Taken together, the comparison demonstrates that post-colonial Feminism in East Asia cannot be understood as a linear or uniform process. Instead, it is a dynamic negotiation shaped by the interplay of colonial histories, nationalist discourses, and global Feminist ideas. The cases of South Korea and Hong Kong show that while

Feminist movements share common struggles against marginalization, the strategies they adopt and the outcomes they achieve are profoundly shaped by local political and cultural conditions.

6. Conclusions

This paper has examined the development of Feminism in South Korea and Hong Kong between 2000 and 2015 through the lens of post-colonial Feminism. By situating both regions within their colonial legacies and contemporary political transformations, it has highlighted how Feminist movements were simultaneously constrained and reshaped by broader social and political forces. In South Korea, Feminism engaged extensively with institutional structures, achieving notable policy reforms in areas such as sexual violence and labor rights, yet it remained vulnerable to conservative backlash and the reassertion of patriarchal norms. In Hong Kong, Feminism operated more prominently within grassroots activism, linking women's rights to labor struggles and democratic mobilization, but its influence was often marginalized within the larger contest between pro-democracy and pro-Beijing forces.

The comparative analysis underscores both the common challenges and the unique trajectories of Feminism in these two post-colonial contexts. Both movements reveal the necessity of translating and localizing global Feminist discourses, adapting them to the realities of nationalist politics, colonial legacies, and cultural traditions. At the same time, the divergences between South Korea's institutional strategies and Hong Kong's grassroots activism illustrate the multiplicity of Feminist pathways in East Asia.

Theoretically, this study contributes to post-colonial Feminist scholarship by showing how colonial histories continue to shape gender politics in the twenty-first century. Practically, it highlights the need for greater attention to the intersections between gender and broader political struggles, particularly in societies where Feminism is often sidelined by nationalism, conservatism, or authoritarian pressures. Future research might expand beyond 2015 to explore how subsequent developments—such as South Korea's movement or Hong Kong's 2019 protests—have further transformed the relationship between gender and politics.

In sum, the cases of South Korea and Hong Kong demonstrate that Feminism in post-colonial societies is never static but constantly negotiating its position within competing discourses of modernity, nationalism, and global justice.

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