Gender and Political Representation in the Eighteenth Presidential Election in South Korea:
A Case of First Female President Park Geun Hye
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Introduction

In December 2012, Park Geun Hye (Pak Kŭnhye), a leader of the ruling Saenuri Party and daughter of a former president Park Chung Hee (Pak Chŏnghŭi), was elected to the first female president of the Republic of Korea. She also rose to the first female head of state in Northeast Asia. Yet, citizens of South Korea were keenly polarized between two frontrunner candidates, Park from the ruling Saenuri Party (center-right) and Mun Jae In from the opposition United Democratic Party (center-left), throughout the entire presidential campaign. Park who represented conservatives won the election only by a very slim margin of 3.53% of votes (51.55% to 48.02%).¹ In this presidential election, gender politics added a completely new dimension to the traditional partisan nature of election campaign. In previous presidential elections, candidates’ sex and gender had rarely been a focus though gender dynamics were always there invisible. It was mainly because all presidential candidates were male and the top executive power and political leadership was assumed as a male arena. In the 18th presidential election in 2012 however, two competitive candidates of the opposite sex rendered gender politics a most salient feature of the entire campaign. The election might well have been seen a woman versus man competition, bringing attention to women’s leadership as head of state and its impact on women’s substantive representation.

Park rose to a popular political leader in the early 2000s as she “proved” her political caliber when she led the disarrayed corrupt-stricken Hannara Party to win a significant portion of seats in the national parliamentary election in 2004.² The party was so unpopular that it was expected to lose most of seats in the 2004 election. Park was elected party leader as a last resort to save the party from a crushing defeat. Her individual fame and commitment to election campaign resulted in defending more seats than anybody had expected. Since then, Park has been by far the most popular and favored politician in all opinion polls. Her being a woman has rarely been a problem or an indication of the lack of leadership qualification, although women’s rights advocates varied from welcoming support for her bid for the presidency to strong reservations on her credentials to represent women’s interests. Likewise, while supporters hailed Park’s victory in the presidential election as symbolic of a historical achievement of women’s political representation, feminist activists kept awkward silence on the historical birth of the first female president. From the perspective of leftist feminist activists who had long struggled for gender equality and
women’s political representation, Park was simply not a right woman to qualify for the first female president in South Korea. In their view, Park is a daughter of the authoritarian leader whose military regime brutally cracked down a fledging democracy and reinforced women’s oppression in the name of economic development and national security. Park’s bid for the first female presidency had sparked heated debates on the meaning of gender and sex for the women’s political representation.

However, a considerable majority of Park’s supporters lent their support to the simple fact that Park Geun Hye is a woman and they perceived her gender, about which I explain later in more detail, positively. What Park’s gender signified in the eye of the general public is certainly different from what feminist activists and leftists see in it. To supporters, Park is daughter of the former president Park Chung Hee whom many people still admire and highly evaluate. Park had performed a First Lady role for six years to assist her farther in replacement of the assassinated mother Yuk Yŏngsu. This early career had left a strong impression in people’s minds that she was a responsible filial daughter who readily sacrificed her private interests for her father and the nation.

While Park had hardly put forward her gender identity beyond being a filial daughter in her political career, she proactively mobilized her positive gender image and took a full advantage of gender dynamics during the presidential campaign. Her catchphrase “prepared female president (Junbidoen yŏsŏng daetongryŏng)” plastered the front scene of the Park’s campaign rallies. Gender was carefully mobilized for her campaign strategies, prompting the opposition party candidate too to take countervailing gender strategy. In so doing, gender constituted most visible and contrasting aspect of the presidential election campaign of the two candidates.

This article examines gender politics in the eighteenth presidential election campaign in South Korea and how candidates’ gender was mobilized and played out to the advantage of Park’s success during the campaign. To that end, I constrain the concept of gender politics to politicization of both femininity and masculinity of the candidates in relation to political representation as they were manifested in the campaign strategies. Park Geun Hye’s strategy for the “prepared female president” is the main object of analysis of this article, yet given that her strategy was carefully honed in against the male candidate of the opposition party, Mun Chae In, Mun’s contrasting gender construction for his election campaign is also analyzed for comparison.
Women and Gendered Leadership in Executive Power

Women’s underrepresentation in high profile political office is a global phenomenon. It is only during the last two decades when women’s presence began to increase in executive office and national legislature. In 2012, world average of women’s representation in the legislatures reached 20% for the first time in history. As for the top political leadership, women’s achievement lags behind of the parliamentary representation. In 2013, only eight presidents and ten prime ministers are women. In Asia, despite its patriarchal culture and religious tradition, women’s top political leadership has not been completely rare. India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka have elected or appointed women in highest political leadership positions at least once or multiple times. Yet, unlike other regions, almost all women in the highest political office in Asia are from powerful political families. Currently, Bangladesh and Thailand are the two countries under the leadership of a female prime minister, and South Korea boasts the only elected female president at the moment in the region. These three women leaders in power too share similar backgrounds in terms that their rise to power benefited from familial ties to male members of the family.

In South Korea, women’s political representation was extremely low in all levels of legislatures and the administration. It took seventeen years that women came to reach ten percent of the national legislature even after the transition to democracy, only with the help of legislative electoral gender quotas. While transition to democracy in 1987 had created political environment in which women’s blatant underrepresentation, then stuck below 2%, could be brought into light, it was by women’s groups’ persistent demands for gender equality and women’s representation in decision-making process in the mid-1990s that gender equality in politics began to draw public attention. However, women’s underrepresentation has been mainly discussed in the context of legislative bodies. Women’s movements have concentrated their lobbying activities in the increase of women in national and sub-national legislatures and the electoral reform to ensure that goal.

Before Park Geun Hye’s election, there were two women who had been nominated for the prime ministerial position in South Korea. The first prospective female prime minister was Chang Sang who was nominated by left-leaning president Kim Dae Jung in 2002. However,
the Hannara Party (the opposition party of that time) obstructed her appointment and the expectation for the first female prime minister was aborted. Later the Roh Moo Hyun government (2003-2007) nominated Han Myōngsuk for prime minister, a longtime women’s rights activist who had headed the Ministries of Gender Equality and Environment. She was successful in gaining an endorsement of the national legislature and sworn in as the first female prime minister (2006-2007). As previous studies suggested, these two women were promoted on the platform of the left-wing government. In addition, women’s movements of the right and the left were generally supportive of the nomination of both women. It was argued that the improvement of women’s presence in all levels of politics was integral to democratization of politics and transformation of traditional gender power relations. However, when conservative women such as Park claim to represent women, this relationship between women’s political representation and progressive politics gets confounded. It reminds that not all women share same interests as women and that some women endorse policies that might harm women of different classes or ethnicities. Park’s bid for the presidency and her sex as woman put a great challenge for feminist activists to divorce sex from gender in pushing for women’s political representation.

Feminist political theorists have argued that the public sphere is a gendered terrain. The public and private division in modern society has been constructed with a strong association with gender division between masculinity and femininity. The public sphere was imagined as shared terrain among equal citizen men. In contrast, femininity is associated with family or domestic sphere. Since women are expected to take primary responsibilities for the care of family, expression of femininity by women candidates running for public office makes them look inappropriate and negative. In this regard, stereotypical gender works considerably disadvantageously for women’s bid for public office. While some women can capitalize on culturally ascribed gender roles such as motherhood and caregiver, they are often suspected to represent only women, not all citizens. At the same time, women are subject to stricter moral judgment on the aberration from proper gender roles than men. In this way, while gender is intrinsic to all public life and leadership, female gender put great challenge to women candidates.

8 Gender Politics in the Eighteenth Presidential Campaign
The aforementioned difficulties regarding femininity in politics did not disqualify Park as a political leader. In face of her expected victory in the party nomination contest, male competitors cast doubts on her qualifications based on her gender. One is related to her marital status that she has never married. A single person is traditionally seen “not grown to be an adult” and a single woman in particular is seen negatively as indicative of insufficient womanhood: i.e. she must have some problems, typically very hysteric, that make her unpopular among men. In addition to such gender stereotypes on single women, Park was also suspected for her capabilities to employ proper national education policies, not because she lacked policy ideas or expertise, but because she had never experienced parenthood herself.9

Another attempt to detract her leadership was about the security concerns. South Korea is a divided nation in face-to-face confrontation with aggressive North Korea. Militarism and national security in that regard has been primary concerns of the nation. One of the contesters for the party nomination for presidential candidacy argued that women are not qualified for the presidency in South Korea, since they do not experience military service (while all men do).10 Female presidency is a premature idea in the nation where the status of a cease-fire with North Korea can always develop into war; that is to say, only strong masculine, also military leadership can qualify for any tough decisions in case of war.

All these attempts to disqualify Park’s leadership ended in failure. To the contrary, her carefully constructed gender messages as woman added a positive slant to her leadership, which was so much embedded in her father’s excessively masculine legacy. As much as Park’s popularity derives from strong support for her deceased father, her inevitable association with her father, both negative and positive, was what she must overcome to reach out beyond her traditional support-base. Her being a woman contributed most to this task.

First of all, Park’s appeal for the support of first female presidency helped her differentiate her political identity from that of her father. Just because women have long been marginalized in politics, “women” can often be a mark of a change and the advent of a new politics. To the extent that a female president had been thought to be impossible, Park’s candidacy created so much debate on female leadership, that itself helped raise great interests in Park’s candidacy. Whether Park can be a symbol of new politics was certainly controversial, partly because her supporters coincided with those of her father and those from a particular region. Nonetheless, her sex enabled her to claim to open up a “new
“politics” that would bring about a great change to the male dominant politics. The ruling Saenuri Party boasted on October 31 (about a month and a half before the election day) that female presidency would bring about “the biggest transformation and reform in South Korea.” In fact, the public might well have perceived that a women president meant a bigger change than the change of government to the opposition party. In this regard, her sex certainly played more positive than the negative role in getting her through the election successfully, unlike previous research on gender and leadership, by helping her overcome or at least detracting her negative ties to the authoritarian past.

Secondly, Park’s unusual career and personal life translated into her specific gender image. She entered the Blue House when she was very young. She spent most of her youth while her father was in power for 18 years. But she was left alone after her parents’ death in the consecutive tragic accidents: her mother’s assassination by North Korean assassin and 6 years later, her father’s death shot by his own man. These unusual experiences gained her great sympathy as a “pitiful princess” with unfailing perseverance. At the same time, no one dares to doubt her commitment to national security for she herself is the biggest victim of North Korean aggression. Her male competitors’ persecution on her only increased the sympathy for her.

Her political career also shaped her gender specific gender image as a sacrificed filial daughter, which strongly appealed to traditional women’s gender norms. She quitted the graduate school after her mother was assassinated to support her father. For the next 6 years until her father was also shot dead, she had performed a first-lady’s role in replacement of her mother. She reminded voters of older generation of her unfailing devotion to her family. She then declared that Park Geun Hye would again devote herself to the people of the nation. It culminated when she claimed that it was the Republic of Korea that she married (Taehanmin’guk kwa chōlhonhan Park Keun Hye).

Image. 1 Young Park Geun Hye performing the first-lady role on her assassinated mother.
Source:
Yet she has never been an ordinary woman. Her gender as daughter of powerful president by birth and as well-prepared female politician who had been trained through six years’ first lady experience in support of her father elevated her to such a level that any ordinary people dare to aspire to emulate. No one can legitimately claim that her unique presidential training is not qualified enough the kind of she must have obtained directly by her father.

In general, she was able to surmount the negative association of femininity/female sex with top leadership. More specifically, being a single woman as well as woman with no experience of military service could have damaged her. Various meanings of her sex, her specific gender images, as well as her familial ties to her father all helped her overcome those obstacles during the presidential election.

In effect, it is proven by many opinion polls that more women than men as well as more elderly than younger voters supported Park. Particularly, women in their 50s and older turned out the biggest support base for Park. Park’s bid for presidency obviously boosted women voters’ interests in the election. In the last decade, the 2012 presidential election was the first time when more women have cast a vote than men have. Also voting rate was highest for both women and men. It was quite possible that Park’s gender politics called out more women voters to the balloting place.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>70.3</td>
<td>71.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>59.2</td>
<td>63.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>63.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>48.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>55.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>76.4</td>
<td>74.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table.1** Change in vote rate by sex and the election
Opposition Party’s Gender Strategy: Competing for Leadership Masculinity

Park’s gender strategies defined as first female president argument prompted the opposition party to counterpoise with its own gender strategies. Mun Jae In, a lawyer-turned-politician, endeavored to break free his weak masculinity, the image of soft man who was devoted to helping former president Ro Moo Hyun. He tries to reconstruct stronger, yet not too overwhelming masculinity.

It was different from that of the incumbent president Yi Myōngbak, whose gender image was a modern corporate man suitable for a neoliberal world.

Mun put forward two images at large. One was responsible farther, and the other was naturally strong male leader who shared young (male) generation’s military service experience. The traditional responsible father and husband image that was represented in image 4 was an attempt to appeal to women in older generation, yet not to younger generation who do not identify with such family values.

Yet, it was the opposition party male candidate Mun whose gender was suspected and his qualification was more subject to question. Due to his weak masculinity, often...
described “lack of charisma,” “second man of former president Rho Moo Hyun” his own independence was questioned. His strategy was to beef up masculine leadership by proving strong and reliable “man” who got through an ordeal of special military unit.

**Conclusion**

Park Geun Hye’s presidential candidacy and her subsequent victory in the election by popular votes raised many questions as to gender and political representation in South Korea. Park capitalized her gender position such as a filial daughter of former assassinated president in order to appeal to the conservative values and remind of good prime time of the nation, as well as the first female presidency to symbolize a new leadership and to break current crisis. Gender strategies surfaced to play a central role in campaign politics. It is certainly too early to conclude whether Park’s presidency will bring about any meaningful achievement in gender equality and women’s life in the future. There is also considerable risk that the arrival of the first female presidency is conflated with the accomplishment of gender equality that is in actuality still far behind by any standards. Yet, it was positive at least that women’s representation obtained considerable interests in South Korea by highlighting on the masculine nature of our political life and what female presidency can bring about in changing such ubiquitous yet invisible phenomenon.

2 Park was selected as a party leader when the Hannara Party fell into crisis resulted from illegal political fund collection. She decided to dispose of the party-owned building and moved the party headquarter to a tent pitched on the street. In the following national parliamentary election in 2004, the Hannara party won surprising 121 seats under her leadership, which was far more seats that the party expected to win in such a crisis.
7 Yoon, Jiso and Ki-young Shin, forthcoming, “Strategies to Improve Women’s Political Representation in South Korea: Quotas and Beyond”
9 Lee Myong Bak made this essentialist comment during the party nomination contest for the 17th presidential election, only to invite critiques on his sexism.
10 Lee Jae Ho, 2012.