
Portraits of Jeju Haenyeo as Models of Empowerment in the Korean Newspaper Maeilshinbo during Japanese Occupation

Seohyeon Lee
Jeju National University

Soon-ok Myong
Al Farabi Kazakh National University

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Abstract: In their article "Portraits of *Jeju Haenyeo* as Models of Empowerment in the Korean Newspaper *Maeilshinbo* during Japanese Occupation" Seohyeon Lee and Soon-ok Myong analyze the life of Korean women divers, *Jeju Haenyeo*, portrayed in the news articles of the *Maeilshinbo*, the only Korean newspaper during Japanese occupation (1910-1945). In the past, the activities of *Haenyeo* have been considered the cultural product of Jeju Island. However, within a structure of female repression, Confucian feudalism and colonization, the *Haenyeo* can be seen as emancipatory pioneers and voluntary economic agents, displaying initiative and pro-activeness and protecting their rights and interests by organizing a democratic decision-making body. From a proto-feminist perspective, the lives of *Haenyeo*, declared UNESCO World Intangible Cultural Heritage, can function as models of empowerment to contemporary women.

Seohyeon LEE and Soon-ok MYONG

Portraits of Jeju Haenyeo as Models of Empowerment in the Korean Newspaper *Maeilshinbo* during Japanese Occupation

In old traditional societies across the world, issues of social status, gender and identity were relatively static and individuals did not enjoy much freedom in this regard. In Korea, the Joseon Dynasty, established by Yi Seong-gye in 1392, adopted Chinese Confucianism as its national religion, an androcentric patriarchal social structure which discriminated women and was taken for granted for almost 500 years. Korea's national borders remained relatively free from foreign powers until the Korean Empire replaced the Joseon in 1897, which had left an important legacy in terms of norms, social attitudes and etiquette, many of which have evolved into the contemporary period. The Donghak Peasant Revolution and other movements that swept the country between 1894 and 1896 forced Emperor Gojong of the Joseon dynasty to proclaim first the Korean Empire and later, in 1905 to make Korea a protectorate of Japan until its annexation in 1910 bringing the Korean dynasty to an end and the beginning of 35 years of Japanese colonial rule until 1945. Although the colonial era was the bleakest moment in the Korean history, the transformation of Korean social and economic structures during Japanese occupation became the momentum to modernize the country (Lee & Lee 201). This modernization greatly influenced the consciousness of Korean individuals, exerting big changes in society in general and on Joseon women in particular (Kim E. 65). Women were offered larger chances of participating in public spaces of education, the labor market and consumer practices (Tae 47). To the Joseon women whose roles had been limited to housework, having a career became an important means to display their own subjectivity escaping from the existing traditional order and values. They endeavored to secure their own public roles, creating changes in their status and transforming the existing androcentric Joseon society (Yoo 73-81). Women, who had been given their identity in relation to their relationship with men, began to have independent social roles and status, thus becoming reborn social beings (Lee M. 10-1), providing opportunities for greater social visibility. Indeed, the colonial era offered an opportunity to experience repression from a double perspective. Citizens experienced directly the power of the dominant nation while simultaneously acquiring consciousness of what it meant to be repressed (Kim E.; Lee G.; Chang; Yoo). The influx of foreign cultures, Western and Japanese, fostered the creation of new jobs, enabling Korean women to go beyond their domestic stereotyped roles emerging as the 'New Women' (*Shinyeoseong*), an elite group which emerged in the 1910s formed by educated women who were able to extend their mental and physical activities (Lee M. 12; Lee Y. 295). Research on the New Women in the colonial era has demonstrated that the subjectivity of Korean modern women emerged and developed innovatively. However, some of this research has failed to cover the activities and roles of other kinds of women by focusing too much on the discourse of 'New Women'; who actually represented only a fraction of society. Between 1920s and 30s, similar groups appeared in Gyeongseong (the old name of Seoul) (Suh, "Modern Girl" 200-1). Career women were often termed 'Modern Girls,' and performed service jobs including the so-called Cafe Girl (teahouse waitress), Depart Girl (woman employee at a

department store), Hallo Girl (telephone operator), Ticket Girl (woman ticket seller at a theater), and Bus Girl (bus conductress) (Lee Sung 27). All of these jobs extended female careers to the public social sphere.

Hyesook Tae has pointed out the necessity of research on other women communities who lived in cities and rural areas in the colonial era, including homemakers, waitresses, receptionists, prostitutes, workwomen, women farmers, and military sexual slaves (46). Other studies have disclosed modern career women such as hairdressers (Kim M.; Kim E.), cafe waitresses (Suh 2003), and Modern Girls (Suh 2006).

However, most of this research investigated women's biographies as career women and their roles in the wave of modernization. This paper seeks to expand this research in various other directions.

Following Anthony Giddens, Korea colonial experience shaped modern institutions and new mechanisms of self-identity, contributing directly to promote social influences that, as this paper tries to show, may have global implications. As the Korean colony turned into a capitalist system of imperialism, its cities grew and became centers of modern development and rural areas were marginalized (Tae 42-43). However, while the city became the main space for the New Women, the rural areas of Jeju saw the emergence of a group of women who would also have significant influence on female empowerment. The *Haenyeo*, whose job was diving to pick seafood, were experts conducting economic activities in their own sphere. They were only seen as an image of wondrous strong women who had lived at the border between life and death in a traditional way of labor on the tough marine environment (An 439-440; Jang 197).

The growth of the *Haenyeo* was greatly influenced by Japanese colonial capitalism (An 128; Jang 216). In the process of capitalizing seafood around Jeju Island and its surroundings, the sea turned into a space of special labor and production, developing the labor of the *Haenyeo* into a specialized profession. Originally, they were women who did farming in Jeju Island, the southernmost island of the Korean peninsula. They also dived into the sea to harvest seafood. They dived barehanded without any oxygen respirator and picked a small amount of abalone, conch, sea mustard, and agar-agar. The Japanese policy of extending seafood production increased the number of *Haenyeo*. Many of them were migrant sea divers (*chulga haenyeo*) who contributed to expand these migrant harvesting activities (*chulga muljil*) to the entire Korean peninsula and nearby foreign territories.

In 2016, the Jeju *Haenyeo* were registered in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2016. Significantly, this was the first case which registered women activities among some 300 elements in the Intangible Cultural Heritage List. Indeed, the Jeju *Haenyeo* exemplify local cultural values, but they are also one of the female professions that emerged in the colonial period which marked the historical origin of modern Korean women. Hence the importance of their lives and activities which should be highlighted.

Studies on the *Haenyeo* have focused on the economic values and the social influence of their labor, regardless of when their activities occurred. New areas of research in this regard are the increase in both productivity and income from *Haenyeo* activities due to migrant diving along with the development of picking devices (Jin 151), as well as the development of mobility by means of

motorbikes, which enabled *Haenyeo* labor to be more effective (Min 148-9). Other studies explored the social impact that their migrant activities brought. Mijeong An (2013) defined the life culture of *Haenyeo*, who migrated expanding their activity area, as a multicultural space. The author also stressed the fact that their activities provided the grounds for historical contact between other cultures where modern experiences and memories remain. However, Su-Hee Kim suggested that when *Haenyeo* performed migrant diving in other areas, these cross-cultural exchanges created conflicts with the local residents, leading to discrimination of the *Haenyeo* and to contempt attitudes towards the hosting localities on the part of the migrants. Yet another study maintained that the experience of migrant diving rather improved the self-confidence of *Haenyeo*, making them have stronger egos and enhancing their capacity to understand the world more broadly (Jang).

This previous research demonstrates the possibility that *Haenyeo*'s experience of migrant labor went beyond the original local activities, contributing to their social impact in other areas as well as the growth of their subjective consciousness. However, many of these studies have been negligent in investigating such meanings in a hybridized early modern context. For this reason, this research investigates the life of *Haenyeo* reflected in the newspaper *Maeilshinbo* which was published consistently in the colonial era between 1910 and 1945 in spite of severe censorship and press oppression by the Japanese colonial power (Park 57-8). The *Maeilshinbo* was a pro-Japanese newspaper that played the puppet role of propagating the idea of Japanese war of aggression after the forced acquisition of *Korea Daily News* by the Japanese Government-General of Korea in the late Korean Empire era and the Korea-Japan Annexation (Kim M.). For this reason, the *Maeilshinbo* has not received much attention as a research reference. However, this paper analyzes the *Maeilshinbo* because it was the only published Korean newspaper during the whole Japanese occupation (Jung) and contains a large amount of news on the *Haenyeo*, covered mainly in the social and cultural sections, offering the opportunity to vividly reveal the various lives of this female workers at the time.

The news on the *Haenyeo* reported in the *Maeilshinbo* during Japanese occupation spread over a total of 131 articles, the majority (114) of which are simple straight news, followed by a feature story (9), an interview (3), art/literature coverage (3), and photographic reportage (2). The articles can be largely classified by content into the following aspects: the *Haenyeo*'s migrant diving, their rights and interests, and their lives. For the collection of data, exhaustive search was conducted using synonymic keywords such as *Jamsu*, *Jamnyeo*, and *Jomnyeo*, which were queried along with *Haenyeo* in the BIGKinds website (<www.bigkinds.or.kr>) provided by the Korea Press Foundation for news search. The 131 articles were written in a mixture of Korean (Hangeul) and old Chinese writing. For the articles written only in old Chinese, the researchers counted on the support of a relevant colleague who helped translate them into contemporary Korean. A qualitative research method was undertaken in order to focus on the multiple meanings of Jeju *Haenyeo* subjectivities during Japanese occupation. Findings of the research are divided into the following four categories: career women as voluntary economic agents; 'migrant divers' as a symbol of subjectivization; active resisting subjects: collective protest and struggle against injustice; and the hierarchical community based on democratic decision-making structure.

One of the characteristics of the Jeju *Haenyeo* during Japanese occupation was that they grew into professional career women in the modern sense. Against the traditional space where women were given domestic roles of compulsory labor, the Jeju *Haenyeo* emerged as independent economic agents that could earn an income as the reward for their efforts. This income also contributed to their entrance into the consumer market.

The prevalence of their large-scale migrant diving was due to the situation after the emergence of Japanese traders in 1900, in which seafood demands increased along with their soaring prices (Jin 151). From the broader perspective of an imperialist strategy to secure resources in a colony, the circumstances in which Jeju *Haenyeo* grew as career women can be ascribed to the necessity of labor force in fishery industries. The labor they had to do was like a military operation, and their activities became vital at an economic scale which gradually increased more and more. The following excerpt from an article shows how they overcame the challenge of harsh marine environments and disadvantageous physical conditions such as pregnancy, displaying passion for their work.

Famous in Jeju are the *Haenyeo*, women divers who pick abalone and seaweeds in the sea... However strongly the waves ruffle or however severely the wind blows, they swim freely in the vast sea as if coming in and out of their own houses, without fear; like mermaids rather than human beings... They work almost every day of the year except just two months, December and January. It is also said that if they were pregnant they would still dive into the sea, with the exception of the last month before the pregnancy, and the month after delivery. As a consequence, they have highly bulky and mahogany-skinned bodies as the real model of career women who know nothing of coldness when it is actually cold, and nothing of illness when they are actually ill. (*Maeilshinbo* Dec. 6, 1926)

The work developed by the *Haenyeo* women was very hard. It took strong physical stamina and mental strength to spend so much time in the sea, gathering seaweeds and seafood using this traditional method. A phrase referring to the Jeju *Haenyeo*, "live this world with the money earned in the otherworld" makes reference to their difficulties of their work, often at the border between life and death, swimming underwater until the last breath at every dive, almost like warriors and soldiers who had to endure the hardest conditions. The newspaper *Maeilshinbo* also reports on the solidarity and communal activities that the *Haenyeo* women supported with their work. For example, there is a reference to an unmarried lady diver who is preparing her marriage expenses by means of her labor. Another story refers to a bride who covers her bridegroom's tuition expenses while studying abroad in Tokyo by her sea diving activities (*Maeilshinbo* July 22, 1942).

Besides becoming the main family breadwinner, some of these women amassed no small fortunes by purchasing fields which were regarded as valuable assets in some rural areas (Koh 176). They also sent their children to universities (*Maeilshinbo* July 19, 1944) and, importantly, helped support their own extended families (Jang 211). There are even examples of donations to the community; for example they donated an airplane and a ship to the nation in order to contribute to the defense of the national land after the outbreak of the Pacific War (*Maeilshinbo* May 7, 1942; July 24, 1942). In this

way, the incomes of these women divers not only contributed to household economy but also had a significant impact on the change of the local economy (Jin 149-150).

The scale of the Jeju *Haenyeo* who participated in the migrant diving amounted to thousands (Jin 2004b, 266; Kang 146; An 2016, 486-9; *Maeilshinbo* August 6, 1916). For instance, an article of *Maeilshinbo* (December 25, 1927) revealed that 5,000 out of 8,000 women divers from Jeju were doing migrant diving and their incomes were maintaining the economy of Jeju. The social value of these female divers was well-represented by the phrase "The *Haenyeo* living in Jeju or the Jeju enlivened by *Haenyeo*?" (*Maeilshinbo* September 11, 1936) The boom of women divers' activities caused a population shift in Jeju Island to the extent of shifting the economic centers of the island from farm to fishery villages (An 488).

Accordingly, the *Haenyeo* became agents of economic growth and wealth, outperforming their initial activities at the level of subsistence, and changing the social landscape and the recognition of Korean professional women. *Haenyeo* labor, initially considered a low form of work within Korean society soon became newly recognized as having commercial value (Jang 208). Women divers not only escaped from the traditional, family-centered, dependent status; their activities went beyond their own local experiences, becoming reborn as independent economic agents at a national level, escaping the boundaries of migrant diving. The *Haenyeo* began to acquire leadership roles in economic activities, participating by themselves in many kinds of contracts, negotiations, and trades, as well as dealing with their labor participation and seafood sales profits.

The soaring demand of migrant women divers and the competition for their recruitment is recorded in the *Maeilshinbo*, with fishery associations from Hwanghae-do to Busan and Ulsan inviting contracts (*Maeilshinbo* May 19, 1941). In the process of recruiting the *Haenyeo* for seafood harvesting, the need arose for a greater number of intermediaries and distribution agents, as well as for recruiters, seafood merchants, fishery owners, and local fishery associations (An 2010, 455-456). The *Haenyeo* became gradually involved in all these activities beyond migrant diving. However, there were also many risks associated to border-crossing activities, as well as swimming in the harsh seas (Koh 173). The newspaper reports many cases of accidents, deaths (*Maeilshinbo* October 15, 1916) and disappearances in stormy weather (*Maeilshinbo* May 1, 1914).

As indicated, the expansion of women divers' working space sometimes caused conflicts with local residents (Kim Su 305-6). According to the media reports at the time, when the women divers from Jeju migrated to pick seafood around the Heuksando Island (located in the southwest of the Korean peninsula) where there was no farmland, they were excluded by the Heuksando natives who were living of picking seafood and presented a petition to keep their own rights against the divers from Jeju (*Maeilshinbo* April 29, 1928; May 19, 1928). Despised by the people outside Jeju, the women divers established their own communities and villages (*Maeilshinbo* July 22, 1942), a fact that reveals the severity of conflicts between the local natives and the *Haenyeo* over economic interests.

All these conflicts increased the experience, confidence and self-reliance of women divers, who answered those who accused them of lack of female virtues at the high rate of divorce in their communities:

For the wives outside who had no education but just bear babies and make meals cannot help starving to death if deserted by their husbands. By what skills could they earn their living? They would have to beg their food, albeit how disgusting, by crying out in tears. Otherwise they would ask their husbands for money like subsistence allowances. We don't do that. With these arms and legs, why could we not earn money? Why left ourselves be abused by husbands who despise us? While there are many ladies outside who consider how much fortune their would-be bridegrooms have, we are not like that. We try to make up our lifelong budget by ourselves to the last (*Maeilshinbo* Sept. 16, 1931).

Assertions such as the one quoted above so the extent of independence that these women divers had acquired, escaping from the shadow of men, and even feeling sorry for women in other areas who were still leading dependent lives, begging money from their husbands within the shackle of poverty.

As seen, the migrant economic activities of *Haenyeo* brought not only spatial movement to their life sphere, but also an entire paradigm shift to the lives. Dealing and trading in the consecutive phases of migrant diving; ensuring a contract, performing the job, selling and distributing their harvest sea product, all of these activities helped them gradually become independent contractors and practitioners of economic activities. Although discriminated and despised as working immigrants in some areas, they were confident that their career activities were more independent and fulfilling than those of other female counterparts. Many articles in the newspaper *Maeilshinbo* show that the Jeju *Haenyeo* actively coped with conflicts and issues in a top-down manner, not only in their workspace but also within institutional power structures. In the disadvantageous colonial framework, where the so-called 'weaker sex' might have had to endure harder conditions, the *Haenyeo* even ventured into collective resistance that culminated in a struggle against the absurdity and exploitation of Japanese imperialism.

The beginning of discontent with and opposition to the Japanese power began in the depleted fishing grounds of Jeju Island, where the *Haenyeo* activities were endangered by increasing taxes and excessive payment of fishery fees. There were also a growing number of intermediate merchants, and injustices performed by the Japanese officials and their abuse of power. This situation forced the women divers to seek greater independence in their jobs and begin performing some of the intermediary tasks themselves.

The underwater areas of Jeju Island are volcanic reefs, rich in seaweed, abalone, conch, and other kinds of shellfish (Fumio 47-8). Seafood produced in this area became an important source of raw material for other industries such as confectionery, medicine, textile, and even gunpowder for the war (Kim Su 299-300). But the Japanese fishermen who had modern technologies began to pick a large quantity of seafood and devastated the area. In 1912, the Japanese Government-General announced the Decree on Fishery to secure the marine resources sustainably and stably. This decree forced the *Haenyeo* to pay the fees for using fishing grounds to the newly approved and established fishery association (Kim Su 311-4). The fees amounted to a fourth of their income, earned during six and a half months, and almost close to the food expenses for three months at the fishing ground (Kim Su

314). Other problems had to do with the fact that *Haenyeo* recruiters and the merchants who sold the seafood picked by the woman divers frequently colluded to intercept profits, thus inflicting a double torture to the women divers. Finally, the newly appointed Japanese head of the fishery association granted the exclusive sales right to a particular merchant, and seafood became priced about half of its original value (Kim Y. 131) even before it was picked. All these reasons led to the rise of *Haenyeo*'s anti-Japanese sentiment and their organizational protests (Ko 67). On behalf of 8,000 women divers, fourteen representatives from Gangjeong-ri appeared in the *Haenyeo* Association and submitted a petition that stated the following requests: to compensate the damage of marine products decayed to date; to pay responsibly for the accounts receivable; to designate the place of purchase as the area of production; and to pay the accounts in cash (*Maeilshinbo* August 27, 1931).

According to records, there were 238 large and small protests between 1931 and 1932 (more than one very two days), and the total participants a year in the protests were allegedly as many as 17,130 people (Kim Y. 130). A case in point was the so-called "Sehwa-ri Police Station Attack", an incident that occurred on January 24, 1932 and involved a violent protest in which about 500 women divers armed with weeding hoes and broomstick spears attacked the police station to rescue 100 women divers who had been previously arrested. This incident was recorded as unparalleled not just in Jeju but also in the whole Joseon era.

The women divers' protests to secure their rights and interests were seen by the authorities as an issue involving political ideology, and there were moves to suppress all instances of revolt. The newspaper *Maeilshinbo* includes several reports in this regard: "They arrested twenty-nine members of the People's Movement Council with no regard to the women divers' petition on 24 of the last month. The move was meant to eradicate the leftist scheme lest the women divers be used by the leftist movement rather than appeal as workers. But the divers resisted fiercely...The women divers who gathered on the day totaled even eight hundred" (*Maeilshinbo* January 28, 1932).

The authority at the time defined the *Haenyeo* issue as instigated by leftist organizations and arrested forty members of the People's Movement Council. Against this arrest, the women divers planned a protest but met with several suppressing measures (*Maeilshinbo* January 29, 1932). During the period in question, there had been a scar of bloody protests of March First Movement in 1919 against Japan imperial rule. This had resulted in strengthened censorship and control. Public demonstration was restricted and armed policed persecuted people in the streets. Intellectuals could not pronounce their opinions. Against this background, the women divers united in street protests were taking death risks facing the violence of armed police. They sang together the *Haenyeo* song, giving visibility to their resistance and even rescuing their colleagues from behind the bars. Thus, women who had been weak in the colonial era, now displayed the spirit of struggle and courage against the imperialist repression and plundering, leaving a model activism and communal support to modern Korean women and beyond. Indeed, in 2003, the Korean government designated the *Haenyeo* as Independence Patriots (Ko 67).

Within the *Haenyeo*, there was a group called the *Jamsuhoi* which operated as an organization in which all participated in democratic decision-making for large and small issues in order to maintain

internal order and solidarity. The *Jamsuhoi* constituted an apparatus to manage risks, coordinate actions and communicate to the public regarding *Haenyeo* issues. The *Jamsuhoi* functioned within the public sphere to maximize the effects of labor where the *Haenyeo* could share professional knowledge about the seas and fishing grounds as well as information about risks. There were some women divers who had a lot of experience and excellent skills and were full of knowledge about the reefs, seafoods harvesting and so on. They led a community in which decision for each issue was made unanimously through the procedure of discussion and consensus by the entire group, and not just some individuals. The opinions of older member was also highly appreciated, a tradition inherited for generations in the *Haenyeo* community (Han 59; Ko 66).

The following article published in the *Maeilshinbo* shows a case in which the women divers discussed and voted for countermeasures against the high entry fees to the fishing ground, a situation that caused migrant divers who could not pay the fees to have to return to Jeju more and more frequently: "On 10 of this month, the members of Women Divers Representative Council of the villages and the diver Haeok Song appeared at the headquarters of the Fishery Association and resolved to hold a mass rally in Busan on 17 led by Jeju women divers to publicly request the reduction of entry fees to fishing grounds and submit the petition to the authority" (*Maeilshinbo* June 19, 1913).

The *Haenyeo* community voluntarily constituted structure for decision-making as well as a tradition of strong communality. Women divers were also required to have been trained for a long time in order to gain experience before doing underwater work. They were divided into groups of high (*sanggun*), middle (*junggun*), and low (*hagun*) experience. The average immersion time was within one minute, and the average depth about five to fifteen meters. Guidelines served to protect the divers from risk, forcing them to observe the rules of underwater work. The women divers often worked as a team of five-six persons and up to ten, amongst whom the oldest and most experienced would take the lead and guide the other divers (*Maeilshinbo* December 6, 1926). Because divers could escape by themselves when tangled in seaweed, their companions had to learn to liberate each other and never swim away from the group (Kim, An, & Park 44-45). It was also important to keep an eye on the tides. For them, the working space was crucial. If a diver strayed into another diver's zone, she would be punished significantly. When such a violation occurred, the high-class divers of both zones met to discuss and negotiate (*Maeilshinbo* September 14, 1931).

The '*Bul-tuek*,' was the shelter for the *Haenyeo*; a space that exemplified the specificity of the *Haenyeo* community. It was a place used by them to gather, change clothes and prepare for sea diving. It was also used to take a rest and dry by the fire while listening to the experienced divers impart information on underwater skills, preparing the novice divers of the next generation for the job, a tradition which still continues today (Han 59).

To conclude this paper on the Korean Jeju *Haenyeo*, the authors have used information published in the *Maeilshinbo* newspaper to demonstrate the importance of the *Haenyeo* in the transition to modern career women in Korea. In spite of colonial domination, these women had a chance to awaken (Lee Sang 84) and see how their activities moved beyond a mere survival strategy to bring economic

affluence and empower the community of women divers as economic agents, first at the local and later at the national level.

The meaning of *Haenyeo's* lives as career women goes beyond socio-economic values. Their activities changed the whole frame of their lives, becoming models to other women. They exercised their rights in the public sphere, overcoming their challenges of sea diving as well as asserting their independence from male authority and even Japanese imperial power. The *Haenyeo* did not remain silent in the face of social injustice and infringement on rights and interests. As a community, they operated as a democratic decision-making body, maintaining internal order, solidarity and helping protect themselves in various ways

This research attempted to go beyond a superficial review of *Haenyeo's* lives towards an in-depth study that highlights their roles as female models. However, given the scope of this research, limited to analyzing the news about *Haenyeo* covered by the *Maeilshinbo* newspaper, it remains a somewhat fragmentary study that hopes to open the way to deeper discussion. This would be possible through further research on the oral history scripts of these women divers who worked during the Japanese occupation and many of whom are still alive today.

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Author's profile: Seohyeon Lee is a visiting scholar in the College of Journalism and Communication at the University of Florida. Her interests in research include UNESCO World Heritage, PR communication, crisis communication, and media framing. Lee's publications include *Reporting of Jeju press and audience* (2017), "PR communication strategy of self-governing local governments for UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Focusing on Jeju, Tasmania, and Hawaii." *Journal of Communication Science* (2017), "Managing a crisis: A framing analysis of press releases dealing with the Fukushima nuclear power station crisis." *Public Relations Review* (2017), and "Do the cigarette pictorial warnings really work for Korean smokers?" *Journal of Public Affairs* (2018).
E-mail: <popoyahyun@gmail.com>

Author's profile: Soon-ok Myong teaches cultural studies at Al-farabi Kazakh National University. Her interests in research include Korean diaspora, ethnic and cultural minority in Central Asia. Myong's publications include *Identity politics of Kazakhstani Koreans* (2013), "Cultural Politics of Otherizing Hijabed Muslims in Kazakhstan." *Cultura* (2015), "The Cultural Politics of Restoring Ethnic Identity: Focusing on Renaming of Streets in Almaty." *International Journal of Critical Cultural Studies* (2015), and "The Impact on Western Imperialist Collection on Korean Cultural Objects." *Cultura* (2017). E-mail: <okmyong@gmail.com>