

***Saeng-myung* Feminism : an Attempt to Localize Eco-feminism**

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I. Introduction

This research aims to introduce a “*Saeng-myung* feminist” paradigm, while exploring the question of what a feminist insight centered on life might be.

In this era of globalization, when exploring the lives of women in one locality through the perspective of “difference,” the level of “gendered life” is one dimension, and the level of the “difference in the experiences of women of different societies” is another. The understanding of both the reality of women in a particular society and the practice of women as agents of action requires both—the difference between men and women and that between women—of these analytical elements. We need to apply to the global/local relationship the perspective that takes into account both the differences between women, and between men and women, especially in this era of globalization. This will enable us to highlight the conditions of the local women’s life, and also materialize the experiences and practice of women as agents of action.

On the other hand, the cultural industry of the west has been creating “universal” consumerism of western products in the local area through the expansion of communication technology brought on by globalization. Thus, the unique local cultures are homogenized with the west, and are being eroded by consumerism and western consciousness that is incompatible with the lives of the local people and the visions of the community. This phenomenon of incompatibility also takes place in the academic world. The structure of knowledge in relation to the engendering of women is not an exception to this.

The negative academic effects from west-centerism make us internalize the perspective of western women (which is isolated from the experiences of Korean women) as something that is universal. This renders difficulties in having an independent view of Korean women, and as a result, can cause us to advocate inappropriate theories. Gender theories that do not verbalize the experiences of Korean women do not allow Korean women to be the subjects (agents). Instead,

they are objectified simply by reconstructing a framework of general concepts. Practice based on the west-centered theory, perspective and analytical framework that is not compatible with the Korean situation, cannot be inclusive when establishing policies on women (for example, health policies for women), to Korean women's specific desires, needs and also the cultural specificity of examining the conditions of life.

The term "life" (*saeng-myung* in Korean) used in *Saeng-myung* feminism is not limited to a biological definition. *Saeng-myung* is at once a biological entity and a point at which social power relationships are activated. This means that the conditions of life are formed not only through nature, but also through social construction. Life is directly and indirectly related to biology, history, economics, culture, and social relations.

In a patriarchal society, it is not only the conditions of life that are gendered by gender discrimination. The perspective on women and interpretation of life are also gendered in a socially unequal way. In addition to these general characteristics, gender inequality is another main factor determining the conditions of all aspects of life including the areas of reproduction and production. The reality of life in society is not gender-blind—it is a systemized gender relationship between men and women.

Therefore, *Saeng-myung* feminism presupposes that "life is gendered according to social structure"; it is a feminist approach in the sense that it fuses the understanding of characteristics of life with values of gender equality. The main importance of exploring life from a feminist perspective is that life is an entity in and of itself, and it is a location where social relationships are created. Life is gendered through unequal male/female relationships on both of these levels.¹

Thus, I propose *Saeng-myung* feminism as a theory that localizes global eco-feminism by partially reflecting the experiences and realities of Korean women, while at the same time containing a universal concept that can be contributive to women of other regions. Localizing global eco-feminism highlights the specificity of the socio-cultural context of Korean feminist practices and the characteristics of Korean women's experiences.

II. The Issue of Global/Local and the Differences between Women

Eco-feminism rejects the globalization of environmentalism that tries to view the world through one universal framework. This is because it puts importance on diverse local ecological characteristics. Therefore, in forming solidarity between eco-feminists of the North and South,

¹ Against this background, "life" as used in this paper has nothing to do with the "life" stipulated by pro-life anti-abortionists, and I confirm that I do not agree in any way with their arguments.

eco-feminism allows the countries of the South to open up space so that their own voices can be found in their respective regions. Also, the South does not accept as a universal discourse the relationship between women and environment, and the experiences and issues of the Northern eco-feminists.

This is an example of the relationship between Korean women and nature, and of how the discourse on life is applied, suggesting two things for the environmental movement. First of all, it emphasizes the importance of the specificity of local regions and Southern countries against global hegemonism. It also focuses on the differences of women in an area based on the experiences of women in that area, thus allowing local women to become agents of the world environmental movement. Therefore, just as women of the North and South demand the dismantling of masculine universalism through solidarity against global environmentalism, the Korean women's environmental movement needs the ideas of environmental conservation that reflect the specificity of the culture of local societies, and also the knowledge and ideology of environmental conservation that enlivens the culture and specificity of local women.

III. The Search for *Saeng-myung* Feminism

1. *Saeng-myung* Feminism as Localization of Eco-feminism

To examine the feminist perspective on life, it is necessary to introduce eco-feminism, which discusses similarities in the oppression of women and of nature. Eco-feminism was first introduced to Korea in the 1990's. Eco-feminism was formed through the efforts of women to save Earth through self-reflective resistance movements against the history of control over the environment by men in the west (until very recently), and also through a new feminist perspective on women and nature. The core of eco-feminism developed by western eco-feminists is the systematic discussion of the relationship between patriarchal sexism—whereby men oppress women—and the destruction of nature through indiscriminate development brought on by humans.

According to Young-suk Yi's (2001) research, Korean women environmental activists appear not to have fully embraced eco-feminist theory. Even those with a feminist perspective who have a definite consciousness about unequal gender relationships say, "In the past, I thought eco-feminist theories were too unrealistic. Even now, I am not sure. Eco-feminism seems too abstract. The reality of Korea is too different." Not all Korean environmental activists reject eco-feminism. However, according to Yi's (2001) research using in-depth interviews, many women environmental activists are uncomfortable with eco-feminism. At a workshop of national environmentalists, the general secretary of the Korean Women's Environmental

Network, Mi-Young Lee stated that despite the significance of ecology and eco-feminism within the Green Discourse of the western world, Korea experiences difficulties in accepting this theory, because of its different culture and traditions. It is thus alienated from real-life activism in Korea, due to eco-feminism's alien experiences.² These problems reflect that Korean women environmentalists have either not been able to accept their body as a topic of their movement, or dismissed it as unimportant.

This indicates that a feminist perspective in discussions on the environment is not necessarily the same as an eco-feminist perspective. There is a sense of non-familiarity that emerges out of socio-cultural differences between the Korean perspective on the environment and western theories on relationships between women and nature, when the latter are not filtered through our own language, and when the everyday experiences of western women and their relationships with nature are applied directly to Korean environmental activists.

In fact, the formation of eco-feminist theory takes place by reflecting on the situation of individual women dealing with specific examples in their own country—as against most macro-theories, which require a theoretical framework formed through a high level of intellectual abstraction. Ecological theory that lacks detailed analysis highlighting the co-related roots of social hegemony will remain abstract.³

The specific roots of Korean social hegemony refer to the historical, cultural and social background of our society, which has been concretized in women's experiences. Warren⁴ compares the process of forming eco-feminist theory with quilt-making. Just as each piece of fabric tells us of the quilt-maker's personal life and life journey, each eco-feminist has a unique perspective depending on her individual cultural, social, historical, local, racial and state background.

This is the context in which homogeneity, differentiation and universality are formed among the different pieces of fabric. Global feminism, however, has the task of forming solidarity through global unity while maintaining diversity, despite having to “unite women in, through, and despite the differences.”⁵

² Mi-Young Lee, “Looking at the Past and Future of Korean Women's Environmental Movement” (2004: 2).

³ King, “The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology” (1989: 23-24).

⁴ “Toward an Ecofeminist Peace Politics” (1994).

⁵ Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (2nd Ed.) (1998: 242).

Until now, it is true that feminist theories and eco-feminism from the west have provided us with a strong analytical framework for the understanding of women's issues. I am aware of the fact that western feminism in its criticism of science and technology also criticizes the western concept of development, opening up space for discourse that takes into consideration the lives of non-western women. However, I propose to go further and use a different concept that highlights the differences between the experiences of western and of non-western Korean women.

2. Main Elements Constituting the Perspective of *Saeng-myung* Feminism

The main framework for discussion on the perspective of *Saeng-myung* feminism is constituted through two axes—the principle of life and the principle of gender equality—that are related to the general conditions of life. At the intersection of these two axes, the feminist perspective of life is formed through the understanding of oppression against women by anti-life social conditions, and of “life stratified by unequal relations.”

Discussion about “life” can be more clearly understood when we depart from the abstract term and focus on discussions of the “body.” The “body” as a social construction incorporates Foucault's idea⁶ of body as a locus for power, and this idea of locus is placed as a definite territory within feminism. Just as the body is a social construction, life is not only an anatomical entity but is also a social construction that is formed differently according to political, economic, and cultural institutions. The phenomenon whereby life is gendered manifests the various levels of control and violence involved in women's lives.

Violence against women not only takes the form of direct abuse against the body, but permeates diverse areas of life such as fashion trends that suffocate the body, beauty standards that induce dieting-to-death, risky and sometimes deadly plastic surgery to “improve” face and bodily shape, unpaid domestic labor guaranteeing meals 365 days a year, low-paid and non-permanent women's labor under terrible working conditions, the ideology of purity and sexual violence, and the instrumentalization of biological reproductive functions through the intrusion of bioengineering technologies into women's bodies. All of these are simultaneously conditions that effect biological life and conditions that gender life in an exploitative way for women.

Therefore, from the perspective of *Saeng-myung* feminism, the concept of women's life itself can be discussed on two levels. One is the understanding of “socially gendered life” (social construction: fashion, purity of ideology, low pay, unpaid domestic labor). The other is the

⁶ Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality* 1(1978).

understanding of “gendered life and woman’s body as the locus of oppression” (the phenomenon whereby the social construction is realized through biological life and body: capitalization of women through reproductive technology, aesthetic surgery, sexual violence, prostitution and battery). “Life” is a concept that is more inclusive than “body”—one that includes biological life. The former (“socially gendered life”) is a discussion of life on the metaphorical level; it attempts to manifest the social context and structure in which life is placed and also to manifest the fact that the structure is gendered—i.e. why life is discriminated against and oppressed. The latter (“gendered life and body of women as the locus of oppression”) looks at the reality of women’s bodies as a specific locus of realization of life, more than just in terms of biological analysis.

3. The Point at which Eco-feminism and *Saeng-myung* Feminism Differ

How, then, can we have the most appropriate insight and vision of life as we approach the relationship between nature and women?

1) “Ecology” and “Life”

It is inevitable that the focus of environmental movements and methods of resistance differ according to the level of industrialization, socio-economic structure and culture of each society. The discussion by Third World women tells us of the relationship between economic development, nature and everyday life (fuel, water, food, etc.), and women’s marginalization and oppression. The research of eco-feminists, based on the relationship between nature and women, deals with the issues of ecological destruction, nuclear weapons and militarization, chemicals, genetically modified food, replication in bioengineering, and so forth.

The understanding of women’s experiences in eco-feminism characteristically takes a descriptive approach. The reason for this can be found in the analytical tendency of eco-feminist theory, whereby it does not seem to have conceptual devices that deal directly with the social dimension of life nor with the gendered dimension. In my opinion, in conducting research it is not easy to apply in depth the concept of “ecology” centered in nature to the phenomenon of gendered life, which is specific even to the empirical level.

The problems of Third World women from a *Saeng-myung* feminist approach can be conceptualized as follows.

In the transition from an agricultural to an industrial society, the capitalist expansion process in the Third World brings problems to agriculture that are directly related to the subsistence activities of women. This so-called process of development has deprived or downgraded women’s roles and status. Thus

women's formal economic activities and their labor related to social reproduction have been unequally "gendered," which implies that the problem is one of "socially gendered life." At the same time, the deterioration of the environment by development has caused problems for women's biological reproductive functions—the problem of "gendered life and body of women as the locus of oppression."

This type of approach has the ability to conceptualize and analyze women's lives in an integrated fashion by joining together the entity of women's problems and the social topography of the problem as expressed through gendered life.

When we focus on life, we can see the anti-life social structure against women, and at the same time the oppression of the environment. If we focus on "ecology," oppressed women in Korea are less visible. "Life" in Korean language has stronger implications than "ecology." In the East, when we say "life," it is a subject (agent) in itself that includes entity, essential energy, social locus and fate, and it has a multi-layered characteristic.⁷

In Korean culture, the concept of "life" is dynamic: it implies "ki," energy, destiny, the bare political-economic relations of subsistence, health, love and birth, resentment (*Han* in Korean), and the most important core. When we say "life," we hear the breathing, the distress, and the agony of women who struggle to live but are imprisoned in reality so that they can neither escape nor move.

Strangely enough, when we say "ecology" in Korean, the word does not have a dynamic meaning, and it approaches closer to a stationary physical meaning even though it is not identical to that in English. In Korean, when we say "life" instead of "ecology," it can be a concept for socially dynamic relationships including power relations, the gap between rich and poor, the relationship between men and women, and between nature and humans.⁸

2) The Epistemological Premise of *Saeng-myung* Feminism

The meaning of "gender justice" in *Saeng-myung* feminism and *Saeng-myung* feminism's methodology can be found partially through a discussion of the *Saeng-myung* feminism's epistemological framework.

⁷ Ki-sang Lee, *Philosophy in Korean Language* (2003: chapter 9).

⁸ The legacy of the Chinese theories of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu also plays a part (Kaltenmarx, 1969; Nan, 1991).

The main epistemological structure of eco-feminism can be introduced as thus:⁹

(1) The relationship between nature and women can be divided into two. One is that women are innately closer to nature, and the other refers to embodied women who are socially constructed.

(2) The former emphasizes feminine values such as caring.

(3) All oppressive ideologies imply the logic of hegemony that is maintained and strengthened by patriarchy.

(4) Eco-feminism recognizes the importance of maintaining the diversity of the ecosystem and consequently disseminating power, and problematizes the uniformity of culture whereby similar wants and desires are globally circulated by the consumer industry.

(5) Eco-feminism emphasizes the dismantlement of the dualistic epistemology that posits gaps among nature, culture and humans.

Saeng-myung feminism shares similar premises, but we need to highlight how these premises are qualitatively different in *Saeng-myung* feminism. The main epistemological structure and qualities of *Saeng-myung* feminism comes from the premise that “life is the subject.”¹⁰

Life is the Subject (Agent)

In the western tradition, there has been a tendency to approach nature from a mechanistic view. In Korea, nature has been regarded as more or less a communicative being.¹¹ For example, the tree has traditionally been experienced as the protector of women, a conversational companion, a power-giver to discouraged women and a living entity that protects the village.¹²

Life as a subject in *Saeng-myung* feminism sees self-liberating power coming from life.¹³ For women, this means that we are able to give birth to ourselves, using our own power through the strength of our own lives. This means that women are agents of their own lives with the power that comes from within us. Therefore, in *Saeng-myung* feminism, women are victims but at the

⁹ This is a summary of the core epistemological structure that is shown by eco-feminists such as Merchant (1990), Braidotti, et al. (1994), Spretnak (1990), Warren (1994), and King (1990; 1995).

¹⁰ I originally borrowed this notion from Dr. Yong-Bock Kim, who is leading the study of “life” in Korea.

¹¹ Kyu-tae Lee, “The Korean Perspective on Nature” (2000).

¹² Ilh-young Park, “Thoughts of Life in Shamanism” (2000).

¹³ This should not be wrongly interpreted to mean that women can stand up again after having been beaten, as if nothing had happened. My presupposition here is the autonomy of life and the inner strength of life.

same time have the power to overcome; we have the power to reject control and oppression, and become subjects (agents) of social change. This can be the basis on which to understand the “liberating motherhood” of Korean mothers.

Secondly, the premise that life is the subject in *Saeng-myung* feminism also means that life is not an object in human hands. This has significant implications for the movement for a gender-equal society, and also for our method of research. Eco-feminism considers nature and women as having different qualities in similar situations. However, eco-feminism does not mention the shared characteristics of life that exist in nature and in women. In *Saeng-myung* feminism, nature is the subject (agent), and women are also the subjects (agents) because life itself is the subject. Life is the essence of nature, humans, and all other living organisms. Thus, to say that women protect nature does not mean that women are the subjects (agents) and nature the object, but that women support the recuperation of life’s subjectivity. It means that women support the recuperation of life’s spontaneity, and of its liberating and autonomous powers. It has significant implications for approaches to counseling and healing.

Thirdly, through the premise that life is the subject (agent), *Saeng-myung* feminism can avoid the essentialist debate on whether nature and women are similar or dissimilar. It also enables the liberation movement of both genders, where the lives of both women and men can universally meet. In *Saeng-myung* feminism, men’s life is also a subject and thus presupposes the universal life of both genders, which then can be used to enable further the questioning of gendered life.

Fourthly, because of the premise that life is the subject (agent), gender research from a *Saeng-myung* feminist perspective requires an integrated approach, with life placed as its core. The relationship between life and women (humans) cannot be separated as seems possible in the “ecological” discussion of nature and women. *Saeng-myung* feminism focused on life must examine life and women as one unit, and therefore needs an integrated research method that focuses on women and nature as both aspects of life, life-giving and life-participating, since it is impossible to capture the conditions of life if life is fragmented and divided.

Co-Influence

Saeng-myung feminism places importance on co-influence. One of the characteristics of life is also energy, so therefore it co-influences and interacts. Saeng-myung feminism places importance on the interrelatedness of humans and nature, and also interrelatedness among humans. However, compared to the “interrelatedness” of eco-feminism, the “interrelatedness” of Saeng-myung feminism refers to the co-influential relationship through which energy is actively exchanged.

Just as has been mentioned while comparing and describing “ecology” and “life”, “life” has a dynamic nature. In Korea, Ki is understood as the flow of energy, as something that is not unilateral in relation to objects.¹⁴ The theories of China’s Lao Tzu are considered to be the originator when it comes to interrelatedness; however, if we compare “Salpuli” with Chinese traditional dances, we can see that the Korean culture has internalized the actions that relate and control energy, and the relationships that come out from the depth of our bodies.¹⁵

4. Ways in which Principles of Gender Equality are Fused with Principles of Life

In what ways do the principles of life and of gender equality come together? Is it the same as the way in which oppression of nature and oppression of women are fused in eco-feminism?

Nature’s condition is as important as women’s condition in *Saeng-myung* feminism, which, however, does not necessarily require nature as a point of reference. This makes it easier to analyze the anti-life and unequally gendered phenomena of modern society. Eco-feminism assumes that the way nature is oppressed is similar or the same as the way women are oppressed. By this, eco-feminism discusses life with nature as an intervening variable, that is, the main idea of eco-feminist analysis is that the oppressive relationship of nature is similar in form to the oppressive relationships in human society.¹⁶ When nature is placed as an intervening variable for the analysis of women’s issues in the First and Second Worlds, the conceptual road is lengthened to the point that analytical strength is lost when it comes to the issue of the complex structure of modern society. Because the conditions of gendered life are different according to the characteristics of society and its problems, it is not always necessary to discuss anti-life phenomena via nature. Although it is not stated plainly in eco-feminism, *Saeng-myung* feminism recognizes that the core that cuts through the discussions on nature is a discourse on life. *Saeng-myung* feminism seeks to look directly at the reality of gendered life through

¹⁴ Myun-hee Han, “Environmental Ethics Centering on Ki and ‘the Whole Value System’” (1997). Economic ability is, in reality, a strong factor in the flow of bilateral energy or influence. However, first of all, the phenomenon where the tendency of differentiation between economics, culture and politics cannot be ignored shows us that the interaction of energy is expanding and that we cannot ignore the implication of the flow of energy having gotten bigger. Secondly, on a micro-dimension, especially within the primary group (in meaningful relationships) not only does economic power exist, but also the dynamics of diverse energy, communication, human interaction and technology exist as well.

¹⁵ I have found particularly in the Korean dance “Salpuli” how the dealing of energy is more developed in Korea than in other cultures of East Asian countries.

¹⁶ For more details, refer to Diamond and Orenstein (1990).

women's issues themselves, i.e. how society which is anti-life is oppressive to women, whereas eco-feminism discusses women's issues using a method that places nature as the point of reference highlighting the similarity in the oppression of women by men and the oppression of nature by humans. The former type of approach can be applied to the analysis of nature, because in nature, life is also the subject (agent).

If we specifically take Korea as an example, we can focus on how the lives of women are suffering in industrialized cities. We can conceptualize the phenomenon of unequally gendered life as the capitalization of women's bodies as engenders of life is where the principle of life intersects with gender inequality. Thus from the specific experiences of Korean women, we come up with an operational definition: the anti-life fad of aesthetic surgery correlates the oppressive conditions endured by women in the male-centered labor world with social "representation" of women's bodies.

The concept of unequal gendered life and the operational definition just mentioned are differentiated from eco-feminism epistemologically, methodologically, analytically, and in the alternative policies it proposes. However, this does not exclude existing similarities between *Saeng-myung* feminism and eco-feminism.

Next, *Saeng-myung* feminism has similarities with socialist eco-feminism that focuses on women as a social construction. However, *Saeng-myung* feminism and socialist eco-feminism are different in their criticisms of patriarchy. First of all, because *Saeng-myung* feminism does not have nature as a point of reference, it is easier to analyze the multidimensional gendered life of modern society. Secondly, because it presupposes life as a subject (agent), it has a framework that enables an integrated approach to both women and life with regard to "gendered life" and to women and nature both related in that they have and are life. The latter is possible because women and life are not "different categories" as is the case with women and nature in eco-feminism.

5. Sensitivity for Life

How does *Saeng-myung* feminism seek to bring life-justice to the gendered life of women? In other words, what in Korean culture can provide a link between gender-justice and life-justice? *Saeng-myung* feminism proposes, as the answer to this question, "sensitivity for life."

Life sensitivity has to do with the disposition to embrace, protect, and help the emergence of life no matter how it may be manifested, as well as the desires, needs and struggles of each one's life. This sensitivity is not only a matter of superficial "feelings" but is also cognitive and motivational, therefore, it is psychological and existential. Life sensitivity is a personal

disposition and also a group disposition. Life sensitivity is not just a matter of personal opinion apart from the political and physical reality, but likewise it is a community oriented understanding and reality.

IV. The Feminine Principle within Global Theory and Life Sensitivity in the Local Context

Some in the western and global feminist world try to solve the problems in women's daily life by investigating the relationship between women and nature. How do Korean feminist environmentalists deal with the women-nature relationship in western and global eco-feminist discourse?

In the case of Korean feminist environmentalists, western and global eco-feminism has contributed to a change of the approach to environment and gender issues. However, data reveals that western and global eco-feminism has not reached the needs, demands, and problems of Korean women. Present discussions regarding eco-feminism indicate that its understandings do not provide foundations firm enough for Korean environmentalists. This does not mean that the majority of them reject eco-feminism. But it cannot be denied that a large number of Korean feminist environmentalists have disagreed with different understandings of eco-feminism.

At a symposium organized by the Korean Women's Studies Association and the Korean Women Link in 1995, the analysis of feminist environmentalists was to make clear the understandings that grounded their actions. One of the most discussed issues was the discrepancies that existed between theories and their practical application around the question of whether women and nature show essential affinity.¹⁷ The discussion about the relationship between nature and women, that is whether women show affinities to nature or not, has resulted in divided opinions among feminists.¹⁸

Shiva¹⁹ views the feminine principle as a requisite for "life subsistence economies". According to her, unlike the dual relationship of man-women and human being-nature in western eco-feminist thought in Indian cosmology, person and nature (Purusha-Prakriti) are "a duality in

¹⁷ Korean Women's Studies Association, Research Committee, "Research Trend on Women" (1996: 230).

¹⁸ Braidotti et. al (1994: 117, 133); Tong (1998): chapter 8; Sturgeon (1997a). For discussions on essentialism see chapter 4 of Braidotti et al. (1994) and chapter 6 of Sturgeon (1997b).

¹⁹ *Staying Alive* (1997).

unity,” and “inseparable complements of one another in nature, in woman, in man.”²⁰

According to Shiva²¹, the feminine principle cannot only be seen as a characteristic of women, but also as energy and a creative principle in men. “The unity within the dualism” of Indian perception, ruling between nature, women, and men, is not the same dualism that rules in western perception on nature. Though I have some disagreements with the Indian understanding of the relationship among nature, women, and men, I agree to men’s tendency of caring. Gloria Steinem also displays a similar standpoint. In her visit to Korea in 2002, she stated that to be a human incorporates the feminine being, thus acknowledging certain feminine characteristics to men as well.

1. Life Sensitivity is the Foundation of the Community of Nature and Human beings, Man and Woman

Life sensitivity is the disposition that can interrelate between human beings, between nature and human beings and among nature, human beings, and inanimate objects by bringing together and activating responses to the others. Life sensitivity is not a new development in Korea and East Asia, but is a continuation of traditional understandings of life, which plays an important role in folk-wisdom and our traditional culture. Our understanding of life is in contrast to the life concept of the west, greatly influenced by the Creation myth of Christianity²², which has evolved into a more instrumental concept due to developments and influences of modern technology.

Life sensitivity is rooted in the principle that “life is the subject (agent)” and that the foundations of community include where nature and human beings, man and woman, live in interrelationship with nature. This understanding is an integral element of Korean culture and its understanding of life, its folk-wisdom, traditional culture and understanding of reality as made obvious by the language usage. First I will present the understanding of life in our culture. I will explain how life in Korea and East Asia embraces entity, essential energy, social locus, history and fate.²³ Life for us is a multi-layered concept that goes way beyond physical existence. Second, I will explain the meaning and implications of life as agent of the gender relationships.

²⁰ Shiva, *Staying Alive* (1997: 40).

²¹ Shiva, *Staying Alive* (1997).

²² Ki-Sang Lee, *Philosophy in Korean Language* (2003: 355).

²³ Ki-Sang Lee, *Philosophy in Korean Language* (2003: 228).

1) Life Sensitivity as Presented in the Roots of Folklore Tradition and Life Concept

First, Korean culture includes the experience and wisdom to overcome suppressive social situations through a perception of nature and the world that differs from the patriarchal tradition.²⁴ Our sensitivity towards life within folklore tradition is marked by the folk belief (*sokshin*)²⁵. This belief acknowledges the right to live and awakens the belief that Nature and human being are destined to live together.²⁶ One example of folk belief that respects nature's right to live and responds to the pain and needs of nature is as follows:

- When you pick a persimmon from a tree and put it in fire, all the other persimmons will fall off.
- When you cut the upper part of a tree, you will go to hell.
- When you use too much water to wash yourself, the cause of your death will be drowning.
- When you urinate near a spring, you will be struck by lightning.
- When you cut an old tree or a tree used for community ritual it will bring death upon you.

These examples illustrate the belief in the importance of a life in harmony with nature, when "life is the subject (agent)" to nature and human beings.

As a localized supplement to the feminine principle, life sensitivity emerges from the nature-friendly local traditional culture in Korea. Life sensitivity not only refers to the needs of human being but also embraces Nature with flora and fauna, and other objects, sympathizing with their needs as well.²⁷

2) The Feminist Implications of Life Sensitivity for Conviviality

Through the premise that life is the subject (agent), Saeng-myung feminism can avoid the

²⁴ Jae-Hae Yim, *Ecological Perception in Folk Culture: The Third Folklore* (2002).

²⁵ *Sokshin* is a folk belief without any particular objective (Yim, 2002: 345), but nevertheless reflects cultural characteristics.

²⁶ Jae-Hae Yim, *Ecological Perception in Folk Culture: The Third Folklore* (2002: 329-357); Jae-Hae Yim & Yoon-Sook Lee, "The Culture of Salim for Mutual Life-giving and Mutually Being-Subject" (2002: 16).

²⁷ Oriental medicine is particularly prominent within this context, as its elemental principles are based on the belief that the body and mind are conversing with each other (Yim, 2002: 219).

essentialist debate on whether nature and women are similar or dissimilar. It also enables the liberation movement of both genders, where the lives of both women and men can universally meet.

Life sensitivity does not only react in a macro level towards the oppressive social structure, but also facilitates the performance of reproductive labor for caring. The major requisite for a society without any gender discrimination is the role of social reproduction, thus, the participation of men in domestic labor and child rearing. Life sensitivity awakens one to the social structural problems of the anti-*Saeng-myung* [life], to the need to participate in the daily demand for care and also awakens the caring labor (including rearranging and cleaning) which women perform in reality. Thus, life sensitivity tries to overcome the macro social structural problems which oppress the life of women. It also aims at the pursuit of personal self-commitment of both men and women, not only arguing for the public sphere of social resources to be mobilized. It is here that the feministic implication gains its meaning.

From a global/local point of view, life sensitivity does not only reflect the characteristic of Korea, it also connects the differences related to the feminine principle and the symbiotic world view on nature, practice, and the problem of life engendering. Thus, it opens a wider possibility for men to participate actively in the environmental movement and reproductive labor.

V. Conclusion

The search for *Saeng-myung* feminism shows that it needs to be approached as something that should be mutually supplemented and developed with eco-feminism. At the same time, it should be promoted through a strategy of differentiation from eco-feminism. The differentiation strategy is, in fact, accepting the major premises of the former liberating elements of western eco-feminism, while at the same time observing the differences between women, highlighting and reflecting the values and importance of Korean women's life context and culture.

It is essential to examine the relationship between life and nature within the local socio-cultural context. Thus, as the central focus of action, the space that the women inhabit and the experiences of these local women differ from individual to individual, creating new forms.

Saeng-myung feminism proposes an epistemological frame centered on recognition of life, the method of research, and "sensitivity for life." In this process, despite the fact that *Saeng-myung* feminism highlights the issue of "gendered life" which eco-feminism has approached only in a somewhat indirect way, we should be careful not to lessen the deep understanding of the relationship between nature and women—which is the strength of eco-feminism—by emphasizing the social dimensions too much.

For reference, the areas where *Saeng-myung* feminism is applicable to practice are:

environmental movements, research on women's bodies, life community movements, cultural movements that incorporate the values of life and women, counseling, training of sensitivity for life, etc.

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