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Women's Political Representation in Japan, China, and South Korea

A Comparative Analysis of Factors

Topic and Research Question

For decades, the number of female politicians has gradually increased. This turning point in history means that women have long been contesting patriarchal attitudes. Women's political representation remains a critical subject in China, Japan, and South Korea. Despite the fact that East Asian countries have shown varying growth levels in their economies, women's status in the government continues at a slow pace. Men continue to dominate the political realm even in the years since women have gained their political rights. Based on these issues, the main purpose of the thesis is to compare and analyse various factors that affect women's political representation in China, Japan, and South Korea. To achieve the aim of the paper, the following research questions will be pursued:

1. What are the similar and different political, international, socioeconomic, and cultural factors that make an impact on women's political representation in China, Japan, and South Korea?
2. Do these factors act as an empowerment or barrier for women to enter the realm of politics?

State of the Art

Discourses about women's political representation commonly revolve around in dissecting the various barriers that cause women's underrepresentation in politics. Research structures are usually discussed in a way that only present one side of the problem and the other part as solution to the problem. The majority of the research is focused on regional or multi-country analyses. Research on women's political representation in China, Japan, and South Korea is available but not as much as compared to studies done in European countries. Such available literature about East Asia is done on its own and not in a comparative manner. Moreover, literature tends to focus on how much a barrier affects women's political representation. In the majority of comparative studies written about women's political representation, experts in the field have an inclination to direct their work on intercontinental or regional case studies (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Labani, Kaehler, & Ruiz, 2009; Norris & Inglehart, 2001; Paxton & Kunovich, 2003). Most of these research studies tend to have a quantitative approach. For the purpose of this paper, a need for a qualitative comparative study of three major countries in East Asia is suitable.

Methodology and Approach

Theories about representation encompass the topics of political science and as well as gender studies. The study draws upon the concept of representation by Hanna Pitkin (1967). The concept of representation is divided into four dimensions: descriptive, formalistic, substantive, and symbolic. Pitkin argues that these types of representation are fundamental in analysing representation in any context. Hence, she further argues that the differences in the types of representation are what make them connected to each other. The concept of representation can also be used in analysing the representatives, their actions, and factors behind their representation. As discussed in the paper, only two dimensions will be given focus to answer the research questions.

1. Formalistic Representation: refers to the formal processes that are legally established to precede the act of representation. This type of representation points out that through formal rules and institutions, women from different walks of life are able to influence political decision-making activities.
2. Descriptive Representation: refers to the relationship between the representative and those who are being represented. To analyse descriptive representation, the number of women legislators and politicians are counted. In other words, the composition of the legislative assembly can be a good example.

For the purpose of this paper, the concept of facilitators conceptualized by Kazuki Iwanaga (2008) will serve as the background for the analytical framework. To further determine the answers to the research questions, the paper proposes the following political, international, societal, cultural and economic factors that affect women's representation in the government: level of democracy, electoral system, candidate eligibility, gender quota, international treaties, women organizations, educational attainment, labour force participation, political culture, public opinion, and attitudinal values.

Main Facts

Presence of women politicians in China as the level goes up is lower than in the local level. Considering the political system of China, a top-down approach regulates all aspects of the society and most especially in political decisions and activities. The nature of gender quotas in China has been viewed differently.

Some argue that gender quota in China is non-existent while others explain that China has a complex mechanism of quotas. The political culture of China is male-dominated. In the political history of China, never have a woman been appointed in the upper governmental positions. This is due to institutional factors and political culture. In Chinese patriarchal culture, women are frowned upon if they perform roles which are the same as what men would normally do.

Gendered activities in the society transpired alongside Japan's process on having a democratic political system. Women are usually excluded in political activities and if they do, this was meant that they are doing it for the interest of the state. The concept of *koenkai* (networking strategy) is a vital part of Japanese politics. Japanese women at that time found it hard to attain personal support groups due to lack of relations to powerful politicians in the higher levels of the government. The efforts of Japanese women organizations to convince political parties to adopt gender quota slowly subsided due to the lack of support from the society as well as from politicians themselves. For this reason, gender quotas have never in actuality been approved to be a legal mechanism. Due to the lack of a better approach by the government, Japanese women organizations are taking a step up to take the role of tackling the issues in the society. Women NGOs in Japan have been very active in fighting for sensitive issues which encompasses more than gender equality. Political institutions do not favour women and kept them out of politics as much as possible. Instead, women are encouraged to take up domestic work and take care of the family.

The type of political system that South Korea has is the outcome of several government transitions from autocratic to democratic rule. Scholars have argued that democratization is connected to the equal participation of both men and women in the society. Like its neighbours China and Japan, South Korea's culture is deeply rooted in Confucian values. Clearly, patriarchal attitudes can be observed on how South Korean leaders have dominated and governed the society in the past. Patriarchal attitudes can still be observed in the South Korea's male-dominated political realm, but due to the efforts of the government, women's organizations, and female leaders, South Korea is gradually changing how things used to be in traditional politics. Another good example is the gender quota mechanism in political parties. The gender quota legalized for political parties to apply in elections was effective in pushing for a more equal political culture.

Results

The findings of this research show that a combination of various factors has an effect to women's political representation. The results are presented in a way that not one factor has a higher value than the other. Even though China, Japan, and South Korea have different political systems and levels of economic development, underrepresentation of women in politics is similar among them. With the presence of factors that facilitate the presence of women in politics, the proportion of women in the government still falls behind to the number of men. The representation of women in politics is relevant if the government wants to promote gender equality and for the interests of everybody in the society to be exemplified.

Variable	China	Japan	South Korea
POLITICAL and INSTITUTIONAL			
Level of Democracy	B	B	E
Electoral System	B	E/B	E
Candidate Eligibility	B	N	N
Gender Quota	E	B	E
INTERNATIONAL and CONTEXTUAL			
Women Organizations	E	E	E
International Pressure (Conventions)	E	E	E
SOCIOECONOMIC			
Educational Attainment	E	E	E
Labour Force Participation	N	N	N
CULTURAL			
Political Culture	B	B	B
Attitudinal Values	B	B	B
Public Opinion	B	B	B

Legend: E = Empower, B = Barrier, N = Neutral

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <http://others.univie.ac.at>.

About the Author

Jessica Lopez holds a BA in International Relations from De La Salle University Manila. She has worked for private companies in the airline/travel industry. Her research interests include a wide range of topics from women's political representation, international trade, and migration.

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