

Refashioning Femininity in Colonial Korea

Kang Hyang-nan, Short Hair, and the Women's Tonsorial Rebellion of 1920s Korea

ABSTRACT This article looks at the activism of Kang Hyang-nan and other feminists with the Rose of Sharon Alliance (Kūnuhoe) during the 1920s in colonial Korea, tracing how Kang and her colleagues used short hair as a symbol of feminist resistance. While the bobbed cut and women's rebellion against traditional hairstyles became subject of public debate, Kang and others were able to destabilize views about the "naturalness" of female inferiority in Korea. These activists capitalized on the debates over the meanings and propriety of women's hairstyles not only to challenge traditional gender roles, but also to suggest the constructed nature of gender itself. However, these feminist meanings of short hair for Kang and others became overshadowed by other images by the 1930s, which foregrounded the short-haired woman as an emblem of modernity, consumerism, and female sensuality. **KEYWORDS** short hair, Korea, Kang Hyang-nan, modern girls, socialism, colonialism, Kūnuhoe

In February of 1926 one of colonial Korea's major newspapers, the *Tong'a ilbo*, wrote of a predicament faced by young women and actresses in the United States, a conundrum which "reached a scale of importance one degree higher than the life-and-death 'to be or not to be' issue in Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*."¹ The purported cause of this existential dilemma was the decision women faced whether to cut their hair short; and from the 1920s, women's tonsorial choices at home and abroad were widely reported in Korean journals, magazines, and newspapers. This reportage was sometimes measured, at other times unabashedly polemical, and quite often sensationalist, catering to the market demands of a nascent Korean press in search of wider readership. While the issue of short hair certainly did not constitute an issue of life-and-death, this cultural practice nevertheless became the focal point of

1. "Pi'danbal i sinyuhaeng: Miguk yŏnghwa yŏbae changbaldang" [Non-short hair is the newest fad: the American film actresses longhair caucus], *Tong'a ilbo*, February 9, 1926.

a debate among writers, feminists, and the literate public that illuminated underlying assumptions about the nature of femininity. The topic of short haircuts for women first gained prominence in 1922, when a former courtesan named Kang Hyang-nan cut her hair short, purportedly to pass as a boy and attend school. This act, once revealed, captured the imagination of the media and the public. The resulting debates illuminate shifts in discourse about Korean women and women's rights in the 1920s and early 1930s.

Kang's haircut reportedly stemmed from her determination to transcend the societal limits ascribed to her sex and to seek a life that did not depend on the largesse of men. She could not have known that it would spark a public debate that embroiled a wide swath of the literate public, including authors, educators, socialists, and other reformers. However, her decision in 1922 and her later involvement with women's activism helped to launch conversations that allowed women to make a statement on the nature of femininity and the necessity of women's liberation.

The deliberation over women's short hair in Korea took place against the backdrop of colonization by Japan, which lasted from 1910 to 1945. Following Japan's rapid industrialization after the Meiji Restoration, Japanese bureaucrats, politicians, and businessmen sought additional territory and acquired Korea as its second colony in 1910 after Taiwan. The initial period of colonization was one marked by harsh policies including censorship, limitations on the freedom of assembly, and other overt expressions of imperial power which earned it the moniker of the "Military Rule Period." This period came to an end after a widescale national independence movement culminating on March 1, 1919. While Koreans were unsuccessful in attaining liberation, the scale of the demonstrations, the brutality of suppression, and the international coverage of the event forced then Governor General of Korea Hasegawa Yoshimichi, the chief executive in the colony, to resign. His replacement, Saitō Makoto, implemented nominally more lenient policies, including liberalization of the media.² Thus beginning in 1920, colonial Korea experienced a cultural renaissance that saw a budding publication industry and nascent public sphere. While this subsequent "Culture Rule Period" was marked by greater freedoms of speech, it was also accompanied by an expansive surveillance regime: spending on the police force tripled in

2. While the subsequent "Cultural Rule Period" loosened many strictures on the press and policing, colonial authorities in fact developed more extensive but less visible means of oppression. See Gi-wook Shin and Michael Robinson, eds., *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

the 1920s.³ Nevertheless educators, journalists, religious leaders, social reformers, and even poets used the newly available media outlets to deliberate the propriety and meanings of women's short hair as a fashion statement.

In East Asia, short hair—particularly the bobbed cut—has been closely associated with modern girl fashion. Modern girls were a phenomenon with global reach, a name for young female urbanites from Tokyo to Johannesburg who flaunted newly available consumer goods and their own sensuality, and a central part of their image was their iconic short hair.⁴ Yet in colonial Korea, short hair was not initially associated with modern girls but rather had a more complex genealogy, beginning with Kang, a former *kisaeng* (courtesan) turned activist in colonial Korea's largest feminist group, the Rose of Sharon Alliance (Kr. Künühoe, 1927–1931).⁵ Before bobbed hair was associated with the glamour and glitz of the modern girl, Kang cut her own hair, purportedly to pass as male and attend a boy's school in 1922. Soon afterwards, her story was publicized in the press, sparking a boisterous debate on the meanings of the hairstyle. Yet short hair in the mid-1920s remained an unstable category; some courtesans adopted short hair as a symbol of rebellion against the commodification of their bodies, while others, including socialist feminists, embraced it as an escape from the male gaze. By the 1930s, however, the defiant and sometimes androgynous image of short hair became overshadowed by a focus on the American, flapper aesthetic, which associated short hair with female sensuality and sexual availability. As a whole, these debates allowed activists to “refashion femininity,” advocating broadened definitions of womanhood.

MUCH ADO ABOUT CUTTING: KANG HYANG-NAN AND THE DEBATE OVER SHORT HAIR

Kang Hyang-nan was born as Kang Hae-sön in Daegu in 1900. Unfortunately, what we know of her life comes from extremely limited sources:

3. Chulwoo Lee, “Modernity, Legality, and Power in Korea under Japanese Rule,” in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, eds. Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 21–51.

4. Alys Eve Weinbaum et al., eds., *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

5. Colonial police reports note her participation in the Rose of Sharon Alliance under the name Kang Sök-ja. See: Keijō Shōrō keisatsuchō [Seoul Jongno police chief] to Keijō chihō hōin kenjisei [Chief Public Prosecutor for the Seoul Municipal Court] (henceforth KSK) “Kinyūkai’in kondankai no ken” [Concerning the incident of the Rose of Sharon Alliance colloquium], *Keijō keisatsu kōto himitsusho* no. 906 (July 4, 1927).

colonial newspapers, a handful of women's journals, and Japanese police records. Complicating the issue further, much of the reportage on Kang was written in a sensationalist vein and must be approached with scrutiny. Nevertheless, it is clear that Kang was a courtesan or *kisaeng* at an early age who later became a feminist activist and briefly an actress. From the age of fourteen, she was trained in several arts including the *kayagŭm*, a traditional Korean stringed instrument. *Kisaeng* had traditionally been educated and governed by the Korean court to sing and dance for patrons ranging from noble to commoner. There were many routes to becoming a *kisaeng*; for some, it was an inherited status due to the transgressions against sexual mores by their mothers. For others, poverty forced their parents to sell them into this role. Most were contracted to a male economic benefactor, who took charge of the transactionary aspects of their arts.

During the Chosŏn Period (1392–1897), *kisaeng* had developed a complex hierarchy complete with government administered institutes called *kyobang* that trained these courtesans. Within this hierarchy, there was an implicit understanding that the upper echelons of courtesans did not have to perform sexual services, but instead sang, danced, or read lyric poems. However, with the advent of Japanese rule in Korea, the royal coffers that supported this system were dissolved, and the line between entertainer and prostitute grew increasingly opaque. Yet even amidst this ambiguity, the *de jure* expectation was that courtesans remained firmly within the realm of entertainer, as the laws that regulated prostitutes and *kisaeng* differed, with the latter not subject to regular testing for sexual transmitted infections, for example.⁶ Thus Kang became a courtesan at a time when the profession was becoming privatized, and women faced more pressure to provide sexualized services.⁷

According to newspaper accounts, Kang's courtesan station was in Seoul, where she worked until the age of twenty when she met a man while at a local restaurant. The pair immediately felt a sense of connection over dinner and drinks, and he agreed to pay off her lien, thus freeing her from her contract as

6. Sayaka Mizutani, "Yŏak ūl chŏnsŭng han yein ūrosŏ ūi *kisaeng* e tachan waegok e kwanhan yŏngu" [Research on the misrepresentations of the *kisaeng* who circulated women's music], in *Hangukhak* 43, no. 2 (2020): 7–60.

7. Joshua D. Pilzer, "The Twentieth-Century 'Disappearance' of the *Gisaeng* during the Rise of Korea's Modern Sex-and-Entertainment Industry," in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-cultural Perspectives*, eds. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 295–311; Chi-yŏng Sŏ, "Sikminji sidae *kisaeng* yŏngu: *kisaeng* chipdan ūi kŭndaejŏk chaep'yŏn yangsik ūl chungsim ūro" [Research on colonial era *kisaeng*: focusing on the modern reorganization methods of *kisaeng* associations], *Chŏngsin munhwa yŏngu* 28, no. 2 (June 2005): 267–94.

a courtesan. This benefactor, a man named Kim Mo (likely a pseudonym), also arranged for her to learn to read and write. Reportedly an apt student and diligent worker, the following year Kang was able to put her new learning to use and enrolled in Paehwa Women's Common School as a senior, graduating with honors and qualifying for a scholarship to continue her studies at Paehwa Women's Higher School.

During this time Kang became despondent over a failed romance and decided to end her life, leaving a suicide note in early 1922 for her landlord and reportedly throwing herself off a bridge into the Han River in central Seoul. The suicide attempt marked a low point in her life, and a writer for the Korean newspaper *Tong'a ilbo* described this moment as the actualization of Shakespeare's line, "frailty, thy name is woman."⁸

Kang was rescued from drowning by a passerby, and she recalled this moment as a turning point in her life. Noting to herself that "if a woman is determined to live bravely, she can do anything a man can do," Kang decided to cut her hair, don men's clothing, and attend a men's school. Unable to find a Korean barber who would perform such a travesty on women's hair, Kang had to enlist the services of a Chinese barber in the Kwanggyo district of Seoul. As soon as Paehwa Women's Higher School received word of her short hair, Kang was banned from attending despite her previous scholarship offer.⁹

Kang's haircut and her attempt to change schools filled headlines throughout Korea and sparked a public outcry. In 1922, the *Tong'a ilbo* chronicled her emergence from the "realm of willows and flowers" [i.e. the pleasure quarters] to the male school campus in a series of articles. The title, "The Short Haired Girl" (*tanballang*) was placed prominently on the page, complete with a double underline border. This title was given such top billing precisely because it told of the creation of a new category, a juxtaposition of impossibility—the existence of a being who was both female and short haired. The article gave a sense of this spectacle, stating that "surely, for the last five thousand years, from time immemorial, for Korean women their hair was thought of as their crown and the very source of their pride; so with the exception of women who went to the mountains and entered the [Buddhist]

8. "Tanballang: hwaryō han kongsang ün iljang üi ch'unmong" [The short-haired girl: the glamorous fantasy is just a scene from a spring daydream], *Tong'a ilbo*, June 24, 1922.

9. "Tanballang: hwaryugye esō hakch'ang saenghwal e, möri kkakko namjang han nyōhaksang" [The short-haired girl: from the courtesan quarters to the campus, the female student who sheared her locks and wore a male school uniform], *Tong'a ilbo*, June 22, 1922.

priesthood, there has not been a single woman who cut her hair.” Noting that Kang was not going to the mountains as a Buddhist nun, the author asked “so under which principle, under which ideology did she do it?”¹⁰

Kang responded by saying that she wished to live like a man and attend a male school. Thus she had donned male student attire and worn a cap to clandestinely take classes. She explained, “I am also a human being, and I am determined to live a dignified life just as men do. Relying on others or seeking others’ sympathy is a fundamentally mistaken act. The pains of this world result from one not knowing oneself. I also feel that my pains stem from me not knowing myself. Therefore I will try living like a man.” The illustration accompanying the first of the interview series conveyed a sense of her steely determination; the picture of Kang depicted her in a male student’s iconic black *gakuran*-style uniform and overcoat, her short hair hidden under the student cap. Her pose was aggressive, even defiant. Her left arm was clenched in a fist, and at first glance one might assume it was a photo of a pugilist, not a former courtesan trained in feminine behavior.

While Kang’s narrative made great headlines, it is crucial for historians to contextualize the story within the milieu of Korea’s nascent publishing industry—certain elements of the story are unverifiable and may have been invented or exaggerated by the newspapers. The story of Kang and her short hair debut was published in 1922, a mere two years after the liberalization of publication policies following the March 1st Independence Movement, and journalistic standards for reporting were still in flux. Certain segments of the narrative raise more questions than they answer; for example, although newspapers repeat the assertion that she attended school while dressed as a boy, it is hard to understand how Kang could enroll in a boy’s school unnoticed by school administrators and officials without the required paperwork.¹¹ The articles do not mention the school by name, making it difficult to corroborate any of these reports.

Nevertheless, while the validity of Kang’s overall narrative might be subject to some doubt, there is no doubt about the vocal reactions to the spectacle of her hairstyle, as the everyday act of cutting one’s hair became a potent signifier. The paucity of source material makes Kang as a *historical*

10. Ibid.

11. “Tanballang” [The short-haired girl], *Tong’a ilbo*, June 22, 1922; “Namjang han yōja” [The woman who wore men’s clothing], *Tong’a ilbo*, April 18, 1923.

figure opaque, but Kang as a *symbol and emblem* is etched in stark relief, as her story attracted critique from a wide range of sources.

Some commentators viewed Kang as a sign of deteriorating times, the erosion of Korean tradition under Japanese rule and an affront to “real” courtesans. An author writing for the popular magazine *Kaebŏk* asserts that in the past, although courtesans were often maligned as part of the vulgar class during the Chosŏn period and indulged in work considered “base,” they nevertheless took pride in their work and had an innate aura of tragic nobility surrounding them. Yet nowadays, he states, it is hard to find courtesans who know the very rudiments of the courtesan crafts or even how to pluck the strings of a Korean zither (*kayagŭm*). Explicitly naming Kang, he notes how courtesans are now indulging in outrageous behavior, like cutting their hair on a passing fancy, eschewing the virtuous, graceful ideal set by their Chosŏn period predecessors. (Ironically, Kang was actually well known for her prowess on the Korean zither during her days as a courtesan).

The author goes on to offer the counterexample of Nongae (1574–1593), the famed paragon of Korean courtesans, who purportedly sacrificed her life for the nation during Hideyoshi Toyotomi’s Invasions of Korea (1592–1598), a destructive campaign of Japanese expansionism into the peninsula. Impressed into providing service for one of the invading generals after a Japanese victory, Nongae feigned interest in the commander, drawing him into an embrace before locking her arms around him and throwing herself off a cliff with him in tow, forfeiting her own life to take his. Compared to such willful and flippant women like Kang, Nongae offered a stark contrast, and the author laments, “we will never see again women like . . . Nongae who were willing to sacrifice their bodies on behalf of the nation.”¹²

This legend could have also served as a conduit to express colonial anxieties about the Japanese violation of Korean women and the specter of racial intermingling. The article lauding Nongae and critiquing Kang was published just two years after the widely reported return to the peninsula by Korean Crown Prince Yi Ŭn and his new Japanese wife, Masako, which elicited public consternation about interracial marriages. Such concerns were not entirely unfounded; in *Imperial Romance: Fictions of Colonial Intimacy in Korea, 1905–1945*, Su Yun Kim traces how Japanese policy toward colonial couplings had precedence in the Taiwanese *tongshi* system, where ethnically

12. Ilgija [psued.], “Kyŏngsŏng ŭi hwaryugye” [The pleasure quarters of Seoul], *Kaebŏk* 48 (June 1924): 95–100.

Han Chinese men were encouraged to intermarry with aboriginal Taiwanese women. Similarly, Japanese Prime Minister Hara noted his hopes for Japanese-Korean interracial couplings as a means toward assimilation, while the Governor-General of Korea, Makoto Saitō, referred to such pairings as “sentimental unions,” a microcosm of the political union between the Japanese and their supposed long-lost racial brethren, the Korean people.¹³

Gender roles and their representations were also salient to such discourse. For example, in the Japanese staging of the Korean play *Ch'unhyang*, director Murayama Tomoyoshi cast Japanese actress Akaki Ranko to cross-dress as the male protagonist. In Nayoung Aimee Kwon's words, this instance of a woman playing a man was not a progressive articulation of “gender as constructed, but rather colonized race as gendered—the Korean male as effeminized.”¹⁴ Here, the director likely cast a woman in a male role with the explicit goal of representing Korean men as effeminate.

Thus the legend of Nongae, who stayed within traditional gender norms and remained devoted to the patriarchal state while rejecting the advances of the invading Japanese general, served as a fitting and timely counterpoint to the willful, self-centered Kang who eschewed such ascribed gender roles. By rejecting the overtly gendered signs of long hair and women's clothing, Kang embarked on a personal fashion-based rebellion. As one might expect, her decision was controversial. Indeed, the critique of Kang and her hairstyle reached far beyond her supposed failures as a courtesan and began a full-fledged social panic during the 1920s.

SHORT HAIR AND THE REFASHIONING OF FEMININITY

Centering around Seoul, in all directions kisaeng, female authors, actresses, doctors, socialists, and others—chop! chop! they cut their hair (möri rül ssök ssök) . . .

Pyölgön'gon, October 1927¹⁵

13. Su Yun Kim, *Imperial Romance: Fictions of Colonial Intimacy in Korea, 1905–1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), 20–22. The concept that Koreans and Japanese were supposedly of shared ancestry was expressed through the term *dōkeiron* (theory of common roots) and served to legitimize colonization.

14. Nayoung Aimee Kwon, *Intimate Empire: Collaboration and Colonial Modernity in Korea and Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 121–22.

15. Changbal san'in [pseud.], “Tanbal yöbo” [Short-haired sweetheart], *Pyölgön'gon* 9 (October 1927): 74.

As Kang's transgressive act became the center of public debate, the discussion of women's hairstyles was embedded within larger discourses about fashion as a marker of Japanese-mediated Eurocentric modernity. Sartorial and tonsorial preferences had served as visible markers of rejection of Korean tradition, and by proxy a tacit approval of colonization. Such attitudes dated back to the Kabo Reforms, a series of measures passed with Japanese oversight by the Chosŏn Government from 1894. Addressing these reforms' clothing polices, Susie Jie Young Kim notes how the issue of fashion gained salience in the "modern diplomatic time-space of nation-states," as Korea's representatives were suddenly faced with a new set of sartorial expectations, initially championed by Japanese diplomats. Thus within this social milieu, reformists found themselves stuck between the pressure of adhering to new wardrobe expectations while facing the label of pro-Japanese for their advocacy of modern garb.¹⁶

Similar to clothing, the meaning of hairstyles exhibited a multivalence that matched the complexity of the cultural changes around the turn of the twentieth century. These concerns carried a social gravitas rooted in a volatile past and marked by contestations over the nature of modernity and enlightenment in addition to gender. Indeed, haircutting held deep cultural meanings not only for Korean women but also for Korean men. For Korean men, the promulgation of an edict legislating mandatory haircuts as part of the 1894 Kabo Reforms was at the center of the outbreak of the Ŭlmi Righteous Army Movement, an armed insurrection against this series of supposedly Japanese-directed reforms. Of these policies, the haircutting edict was seen as the most odious, and the Righteous Army is remembered for their slogan "Even if my head be cut off, never my hair."¹⁷

Yi Nŭng-hwa, former Secretary Minister (*chusa*) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Commerce, and Industry, shared his own recollections of the initial reaction to the male haircutting edict during his time in service for the Chosŏn Government. Writing for the women's magazine *New Home* (*Singajŏng*) in 1933—when women's short hair was no longer unique to Kang but instead was widespread during the women's bobbed-cut craze—Yi's account provides his female readership a point of comparison in how men's short hair had been new to the Korean peninsula nearly four decades

16. Susie Jie Young Kim, "What (Not) to Wear: Refashioning Civilization in Print Media in Turn-of-the-Century Korea," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 15, no. 3 (Winter 2007): 612.

17. Sukman Jang, "The Politics of Haircutting in Korea: A Symbol of Modernity and the 'Righteous Army Movement' (1895–1896)," *The Review of Korean Studies* 1 (September 1998), 27.

earlier. As a minister appointed amidst a series of modernizing reforms, Yi had firsthand experience of these changes. In fact, his nomination was untimely, as he took up his post the very day that the Short Hair Edict (*tanballyŏng*) was passed, which mandated that Korean men shear their topknots (*sangt'u*) for a cropped cut in the Western style.

Writing decades after the event, Yi paints a picture of unabashed anguish, noting how after the law was passed, there were many men who held their severed topknots while wailing loudly. Other men implored for their deceased ancestors to grant their understanding before undergoing the legislated haircut. He reflects how his acquaintances went to their classrooms, removed their horsehair hats, which symbolized their nobility, and let down their topknots, upon which a young man named Pak Hong-sik—who was not a trained barber—sheared their hair. Afterwards, he recalls how the men carefully wrapped their freshly parted locks in paper to present to their deceased ancestors, presumably at their familial gravesites.¹⁸

As Yi notes, the Short Hair Edict caused more consternation as it spread outside the cabinet and was promulgated throughout the peninsula. As the decree was announced through official handbills, many members of the public assumed that the order had been legislated due to the pressure of pro-Japanese reform elements, and resistance was aimed not only at the tonsorial decree but also at the spread of Japanese influence in the peninsula. The maintenance of a topknot was a means of adhering to the Confucian precept that one must not damage one's body, hair, or skin, which were inherited from one's ancestors. As such, resistance against the Short Hair Edict for men was driven by a mixture of defiance toward Japanese encroachment, adherence to Confucian mores, and sense of patriotism. Yi notes that some men went to great lengths to avoid the proscribed cuts: some top-knotted members of the nobility fled town at night by means of women's palanquin (*yŏja ūi kyogŏ*), while others, determined to wed with their locks intact, rushed into marriage at a very young age.¹⁹

For women, within the context of Korean history and culture, hairstyles had long been a signifier of not only gender but also class and marital status. During the Chosŏn Period, there was a wide range of hairstyles available to women, all of which served as concrete signifiers. *Ŏyŏ mŏri* was an elaborate,

18. Yi Nŭng-hwa, "Tanbal ipsok" [Adopting the custom of short hair], *Singajŏng* 1 (June 1933): 212–13.

19. *Ibid.*

regal style that incorporated a wig to create a halo shape and was appropriate for the very upper echelons of female society. Married women, depending on their class, could arrange their hair into a bun behind their heads in the *ch'öpji möri* or *ttoya möri* styles, both of which resemble a chignon. For single women, *kwimit möri* indicated their marital availability through parted hair and braids. Thus, hairstyle had a history of signifying class and marital status long before the introduction of the much-maligned bobbed cut and was an important element of Chosŏn society.

Furthermore, the context of women's hairstyles was also overdetermined by nationalistic concerns. For many, the decision to adopt Japanese-mediated "modern" practices, including the bobbed cut, was construed not only as a departure from Chosŏn Period tradition, but also as compliance with Japanese colonizing ideology. Haircutting was at once a transgression against gender norms and a symbol of acquiescence to Japanese inflections of Western modernity, a departure from the Korean nation, Korean tradition, and Korean femininity alike. It was no coincidence that the aforementioned writer for *Kaeb'yök* contrasted Kang, who adopted short hair both as a statement of empowerment and a means to attend a boy's school, with the traditional courtesan Nongae, for this national heroine had embodied traditional femininity, resisted Japanese invasion, and displayed self-sacrifice for the nation all at once.

Yet there was another aspect to women's short hair that illuminates these debates, which revolves around views about the relationship between women's bodies and femininity. The scholar Elizabeth Grosz notes that "patriarchal oppression . . . justifies itself, at least in part, by connecting women much more closely than men to the body."²⁰ This is part of a belief that "women are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men," resulting in the "coding of femininity with corporeality."²¹ As a result, the cutting of hair, which was closely linked with bodily representation of femininity, posed a deep affront to gender mapped upon the body. This connection was made explicit through semantics: the term *modan kköl*, a phonetic Hangeul approximation of "modern girl," was often written with the Chinese characters meaning "hair" (pronounced *mo*) and "to cut" (pronounced *dan*), associating the modern girl with her iconic bobbed cut. Yet

20. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 14.

21. *Ibid.*

dan has a second layer of meaning; the character can also express rejection, giving the word an additional semantic reading as “hair rejecters.” Thus women’s refusal of traditional hairstyles could be concatenated with the naturalness of femininity.²² Yet for Kang, her actions suggest that the “rejection” of hair was driven by a desire to destabilize ascribed roles for women and challenge the “naturalness” of female inequality—a phenomenon I call the refashioning of femininity.

Fittingly, because shearing this outward signifier of femininity brought into question the stability of the category itself, the vocal, often impassioned responses to the short-haired woman phenomenon belied its seemingly quotidian nature. The issue of women’s hairstyles, in part driven by the “unnaturalness” of both the fashion and the gender-fluid practices it represented, soon dominated the headlines. In the latter half of the 1920s alone, the *Tong’a ilbo*, *Chungwoe ilbo*, and *Sidae ilbo* carried over two hundred articles on the topic of women and short hair. Educators, authors, and social critics penned a neologism, *tanballon* or short-hair theory, to describe their own opinions on the matter. A wide range of prominent public figures chimed in on the debate, including Kim Hwallan, a women’s education pioneer and one of the first female doctorates who received her degree from Columbia University, Yöm Sang-söp, one of colonial Korea’s most famous canonical authors, Kim Ök, the “father of modern Korean poetry,” and Kim Ki-rim, a poet, literary critic, and founding member of the Kuinhoe, an exclusive literary society. As the practice grew in popularity during the mid-1920s, even community leaders became involved, holding a conference in January of 1926 devoted solely to debating the propriety of short hairstyles. The meeting was held in the YMCA building in the Jongno district at the heart of Seoul, which was one of the largest public spaces and usually reserved for crucial political or religious events. Judging from the (admittedly blurry) extant pictures of the gathering, it seems that there were no women among the audience.²³

22. “Kajöng t’ongsin: tanbal pandae” [Correspondence from the home: I oppose short hair], *Tong’a ilbo*, August 31, 1925. The unnamed author writes in a feminine voice, as evident in the respectful terms she uses for other women which can only be used by female locutors. She concludes her opposition by stating how in the name of naturalness she cannot support the practice.

23. “Yöja tanbal kabu t’oron” [Debate on the propriety of short hair on women], *Tong’a ilbo*, January 21, 1926. According to the article, one woman was invited to speak but was arrested before her scheduled appearance.

The conspicuousness of the discourse over short hair even shaped the reportage of international news in Korea. One article in February of 1926 notified readers that in a town in Tennessee, the city council decided not to issue marriage licenses to women who had cut their hair short, a thinly disguised means of discouraging Korean women from indulging in this practice by underlining its supposed contentiousness in the United States.²⁴ Another article with tidings from Paris, France, noted how a young girl, aged fourteen, asked her parents to allow her to cut her hair short. Because her father refused, she went to a barber by herself and received a bobbed cut. Enraged, her father sued the hair salon trying to gain recompense for the damage done to her hair. The French judge decided that the suffering caused by short hair could not be calculated as quantifiable punitive damage.²⁵

Another article reported on the popular sentiment in the United States that people must “exterminate short hair [on women]” (*tanbal ūl pangmyōl haera*.)” Citing a meeting of the Hairdresser’s Association in Chicago in October of 1929, this barber’s guild supposedly decided that “from long blond hair emanates the very pinnacle of feminine beauty,” and expressed their hopes that women would refrain from the bobbed cut.²⁶ The unspoken implication: if American barbers hate short hair, Koreans should too. Even Korea’s neighbors in Manchuria were reported to suffer from the specter of short-haired women. The *Tong’a ilbo* noted that short hair was banned in Manchuria by law, as the Chinese warlord Zhang Zuolin prohibited the practice because his son Xueliang had supposedly been led into “debauchery” (*pangt’ang*) by a young short-haired woman.²⁷ From the far reaches of rural Tennessee to Manchuria next door, Kang and the specter of short-haired women were a subject of popular debate.

Initially, many early adopters of the bobbed haircut connected it explicitly to socialist women’s liberation. In an article for *Sinyōsōng* in 1925, the vocal leftist feminist Hō Chōng-suk gives her thoughts on the recent trend in an article entitled “My Short Hair, Before and After.” Hō outlines her conviction that her hairstyle was part of a larger means of resisting the male social gaze and of subverting the pressures placed upon women to carve a new space

24. “Tanballang ūn sijip motga: Miguk T’ensi-ju” [Short haired women cannot get married: Tennessee, USA], *Tong’a ilbo*, February 22, 1922.

25. “Sōnyō ūi tanbal chaep’an” [Girl’s short hair on trial], *Tong’a ilbo* January 24, 1926.

26. “Tanbal pandae” [Short-hair opposition], *Tong’a ilbo* December 13, 1929.

27. “Yōja tanbal kŭmji: Zhang Zuolin ūi kosim” [Prohibitions on women’s short hair: Zhang Zuolin’s struggles], *Tong’a ilbo* November 14, 1926.

for independence.²⁸ Others echoed this sentiment. One unnamed author contributed their thoughts for the kisaeng trade journal *Changhan*. The name of this journal, meaning something akin to “enduring resentment,” captures the anguish shared by women working as courtesans, entangled in sex(ualized) work. The author notes how following the Bolshevik Revolution, short hair carried a specific semiotic meaning in colonial Korea, and writes: “ideologically, short hair carried the meaning of the eradication of traditional mores (*sasangjök ūro chaerae ūi insŭp ūl t’ap’a bandanŭn ūimi*), so within the women’s realm short hair gained a great level of popularity.”²⁹ Citing examples of kisaeng socialist activists, the author provides details on how short hair became a signifier of a liberation from such “traditional mores.” One courtesan, whose name was censored by colonial police and was removed from the text, cut her hair short as part of her participation in the proletarian movement, while a prostitute at a restaurant in Gimcheon city cut her hair short to signal her support of the movement to abolish prostitution and critique the “meat market” (*in’yuk sijang*) that entangled her.³⁰ As short hair started to become decoded in other ways, this particular socialist reading of the practice became described as the “Russian” view.

Later, as a leader of the Rose of Sharon Alliance (Kūnuhoe, henceforth Alliance), colonial Korea’s largest feminist organization, Hō elaborated her position on socialist liberation for women. In her piece entitled “The Historical Position of the Rose of Sharon Alliance and Confronted Duties” for the Alliance’s journal, this short hair proselytizer gives a broad outline of the views of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: that for every human society, the economic base provides the motive force for the superstructure, and that culture is also determined by the economic base. She also presents the stages of human development: the era of a primitive communism, the era of slavery, the era of serf feudalism, and the era of capitalism. In this process of development, the unfavorable conditions for women started with changes in the means of production and system of property ownership. Hō notes that in primitive communism, women were producers on equal footing with men, but with the establishment of private property, women came to be seen as non-productive laborers, had their rights stripped from them, and “started to

28. Hō Chōng-suk, “Na ūi tanbal kwa tanbal chōnhu” [My short hair: before and after], *Sinyūsōng* (October 1925): 14–16.

29. Omūbu [pseud.], “Kisaeng kwa tanbal,” [Kisaeng and short hair], *Changhan* 1 (10 January 1927): 32.

30. *Ibid.*, 34.

be treated as non-humans and men's private possessions: household slaves and playthings." She also insists that Korean women's experiences of this process were more miserable than those faced by women of other nations, because East Asian cultures lauded submissiveness and passivity for women.³¹

Within her writings, Hō focused on how the loss of independence followed the development of private property. August Bebel's *Women Under Socialism* and Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* were ideological primers for socialist visions of women's liberation in Korea, and many Alliance members drew heavily on these works.³² *The Origins of the Family* notes that "the more in the course of economic development, undermining the old communism and increasing the density of population, the traditional sexual relations lost their innocent character suited to the primitive forest, the more debasing and oppressive they naturally appeared to women."³³ Although humanity had been universally matrilineal, the patrilineal revolution, which Engels calls "one of the most radical ever experienced by humanity," followed the accumulation of private property. The oppression of women coincided with the development of private wealth through the domestication of animals and private ownership of flocks, which reshaped social relations.³⁴

Based on this teleology of gender relations, socialist feminists could refashion femininity, challenging some of the hegemonic beliefs about female inferiority. Hō insists that "if one retraces the history of women, women were humans that did not have any material differences with men."³⁵ Hō gives this statement scientific imprimatur, insisting that "based on the research by ethnologists and biologists," one can see that historically, "women's intellect, physique, social standing, and political rights were not inferior to men's, and [women] were equal persons."³⁶ Thus she asserts the only gender difference was merely one of biological function, not of human rights or personality. One of her colleagues in the Alliance went even further,

31. Hō, "Kūnuhoe undong ūi yōksachōk chiwi wa tangmyōn immu" [The Rose of Sharon Alliance movement's historical positionality and confronted duties], *Kūnu* 1 (May 1929): 5–9.

32. Kim Kyōng'il, "1920–30nyōndae Hanguk ūi sinyōsōng kwa sahoe chu'ui" [1920–1930s Korean New Women and socialism], *Hanguk munhwa* 36 (December 2005): 275.

33. Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, trans. Ernest Untermann (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1902), 65.

34. Ibid, 66–68.

35. Hō, "Kūnuhoe undong," 6–7.

36. Ibid.

arguing that any difference in men's and women's physical and intellectual capabilities stemmed entirely from social conditions:

As you may have noticed, even though they are all male, depending on their jobs and lifestyles, men have considerable differences in their physiques and intellectual prowess. Doesn't a soldier have a soldier's physique and temperament, a factory employee the traits of a factory worker, a teacher have a teacher's, and a scholar have a scholar's? These women—who have been stepped on by men, who have lived in their boudoir for thousands of years—how ridiculous is it to conclude that because their physical and intellectual abilities may be slightly inferior, there can never be a day of [gender] equality? . . . Is this not the inevitable result from receiving unequal education and living in a social environment that has been unequal for thousands of years? It is not the case that [women] are innately inferior to men; this is an inequality shaped by social contradictions.³⁷

Gender difference, for this writer, is merely the result of social training. Just as differences developed among various groups of men depending how they spent their professional lives, differences could likewise be expected to develop between men and women. As further evidence of the malleability of gender roles, the Alliance colleague gives the example of *haenyŏ*, who were the female divers indigenous to Jeju Island off the southern coast of Korea. These women collected abalone and fish, serving as the main breadwinners while creating a unique matriarchal household and culture on the picturesque island. The author asserts that *haenyŏ* had strength on par with any man and cites these divers as a counterexample to arguments about the immutable physical inferiority of women.³⁸

Over the course of the 1920s, Kang also seems to have embraced, or at least was drawn to, elements of socialist feminism. After a short, unsuccessful stint learning Japanese at a school in Tokyo, Kang traveled to Shanghai to learn Russian, during which she became engrossed in her studies of socialist magazines and texts.³⁹ By 1927, she became involved in the Chosŏn Yŏsŏng

37. Ch'oe Ũn-hŭi, "Yŏsŏng kwa tan'gyŏl" [Unity with women], *Rose of Sharon Alliance Leaflet* (1927); reprinted in Ch'oe Ũn-hŭi, *Ch'ugye Ch'oe Ũn-hŭi chŏnjip: Hanguk kŭndae yŏsŏngsa* [The complete works of Ch'ugye Ch'oe Ũn-hŭi: modern Korean women's history] vol. 3 (Seoul: Chosŏn ilbosa, 1991), 232–33. Note: The compilation erroneously lists the publication year for the leaflet as 1937.

38. Ch'oe Ũn-hŭi, "Yŏsŏng kwa tan'gyŏl," 233–34.

39. "Namjang han yŏja" [The woman who wore men's clothing], *Tong'a ilbo*, April 18, 1923.

Tong'uhoe (Korean Women's Associate's Society), a feminist organization centered around the ideal that women's rights would not materialize without a revolution to overthrow capitalism, as personal liberation was predicated upon economic liberation.⁴⁰ She was surveilled by the colonial police, appearing frequently in records from the Seoul Jongno police chief reports to the Chief Public Prosecutor for the Seoul Municipal Court (Keijō chihō hōin kenjisei), a space usually reserved for socialists and ardent nationalists.⁴¹ In a 1931 article referencing Russian feminist Alexandra Kollontai's socialist romance *Vasilisa Malygina*, the magazine *Samch'ōlli* listed Kang as one of the female "warriors" (*t'usa*) involved in the socialist movement alongside other prominent leftists like U Bong-u and Pak Wŏn-hŭi.⁴² Finally, Japanese police records note Kang's participation in key meetings with the left-leaning Rose of Sharon Alliance, the largest women's rights organization in colonial Korea, during which she provided financial support to the cause.⁴³ Again, the paucity of sources forces one to rely on inference, but given that Kang was active in two leftist feminist organizations with Hō, it seems likely that they may have shared similar views.

However, if short hair represented a challenge to hegemonic ideas of female inferiority and the male gaze, such views did not go uncontested. Shortly after Kang's short-haired debut, Yŏm Sang-sŏp, a renowned author and member of Korea's literary canon, criticized this ideology for the journal *Sinsaenghwal* in a piece entitled "The Issue of Women's Short Hair and [my Thoughts] Concerning It: For the Women's Realm." Yŏm states that he simply cannot agree that the mere act of cutting one's hair and wearing men's clothing could somehow materialize women's liberation; if this were the case, all the money that was being spent on women's education was being wasted, as a few yen invested in a haircut and a new outfit would suffice. Kang, he suggests, may have adhered to such puerile notions because she had only

40. Changbal san'in [pseud.], "Tanbal yŏbo" [Short-haired sweetheart], *Pyŏlgŏn'gon* vol. 9 (October 1927): 74; Sang-suk Chŏn, "Chosŏn yŏsŏng tong'uhoe rŭl t'onghaesŏ pon ch'ogi sahoe chu'ui yŏsŏng chisik'in ūi yŏsŏng haebangnon" [Viewing socialist intellectual women's theories of female liberation through the Korean Women's Associate Society], *Hanguk chŏngch'i woegyosa nonch'ong* 22, no. 2 (2001): 33–57.

41. See Keijō Shōrō keisatsuchō [Seoul Jongno police chief] to Keijō chihō hōin kenjisei [Chief Public Prosecutor for the Seoul Municipal Court], "Kinyūkai'in kondankai no ken" [Concerning the incident of the Rose of Sharon Alliance colloquium], KSK no. 906 (July 4, 1927); KSK no. 1276 (July 3, 1928); KSK no. 1441 (July 26, 1928).

42. Ch'osa (pseud.), "Hyŏndae yŏsŏng sasang'gadŭl, pulgŭn yŏn'ae ūi chuingongdŭl" [Modern female intellectuals, the protagonists of *Red Love*], *Samch'ōlli* vol. 17 (July 1931): 18, 51.

43. KSK no. 906 (July 4, 1927).

a common school diploma. Yöm—who had attended Japan’s elite Keio University—argues that given Kang’s meager “intellectual level” (*chisik chǒngdo*), she clearly lacked the knowledge to speak about gender ideology or women’s lifestyles.⁴⁴ (Despite his initial qualms, Yöm seems to have changed his stance by 1927, as his portrayal of Chǒng Maria in the short story “Love and Sin” is much more positive than what he posits here).

Despite such criticism circulating in the public, for many women short hair was decoded as a statement: one that proclaimed female agency, challenged the discourse of female inferiority, and signaled a rejection of traditional mores. Yet by the late 1920s and early 1930s, short hair became emblematic of an entirely different set of beliefs.

FROM SHORT-HAIRED REBELS TO BOBBED-CUT DOLLS

In the early to mid-1920s, the meaning of short hair was still open to debate, and there were two broad interpretations of the practice. One was the disruptive “Russian” view that construed the practice as a resistance to gender norms and advocated the abolishment of traditional mores. This interpretation was soon joined by a more glamorized “American” view, which saw the bobbed cut as an aesthetic practice indicative of a bourgeoisie femininity. Despite Kang and the role of short hair in destabilizing assumptions about gender in the early to mid-1920s and subsequent socialist interpretations of the practice, in the 1930s short hair became more aligned with the American view and the commodification of femininity, not the refashioning of it.

By 1930, the practice of cutting one’s hair short went by many names, all English loanwords written in Korean script: the horizontal cut (*horichünt’al*), the single cut (*ssing’gūl k’at’ū*), the bobbed cut (*pobū*), or the boyish cut (*ppo’iswi k’at’ū*).⁴⁵ Short hair was glamorized, associated not with the deconstruction of gender but rather the glitz of Hollywood. While in 1927 proletarian prostitutes adopted short hair to protest their bodies being sold on the “market of flesh,” by the early 1930s the bobbed cut represented women’s availability on that very market. For example, in a debate in 1932 about short hair, the prominent male writer and literary critic Kim Ki-rim (Kim In-son)

44. Yöm Sang-söp, “Yōja tanbal munjae wa kü e kwallyön hayō: yōjagye e yōham” [Concerning the women’s shorthair issue and associated problems: for *Women’s Realm*], *Sinsaenghwal* 8 (August 1922), quoted in Yöm Sang-söp, *Yöm Sang-söp munjang chōnjip vol. 1 1918–1928* [The complete works of Yöm Sang-söp, vol. 1 1918–1928] (Seoul: Somyōng ch’ulp’an, 2013), 226–27.

45. Kim Hwallan, Kim Kirim, et al., “Tanbal kwa Chosōn yōsōng” [Short hair and Korean women], *Tong’gwang* 37 (September 1932): 60–62.

sympathizes with people who opposed short hair, noting that it was a symbol of commodified eroticism, signaling that the women were café waitresses or dance girls, both of which were jobs associated with sex work.⁴⁶ Despite Hō's efforts to use short hair to escape the male gaze, the hairstyle soon became associated with modern girls who reveled in such attention.⁴⁷ Short hair was no longer a sign of resistance, but rather one of conspicuous consumption.

In light of these negative connotations, another leader from the Alliance, the Protestant feminist Kim Hwallan, tried to reconstrue short hair as a signifier separate from such contentious debates. Writing for the journal *Tong'gwang* in 1932, Kim notes that she personally did not have a particular motive when she cut her hair three or four years before, but rather thought of it as being akin to “cutting one's fingernails when they are too long, or washing one's hands once they get too dirty,” thus it was just “common sense” concerning one's everyday life. Kim also felt that short hair was especially well suited for Korean faces, and noted how it complimented the “curves of a woman's face when she smiled.”⁴⁸

While women like Kim Hwallan attempted to decouple short hair from some of its more controversial meanings, many continued to associate short hair with flippant consumption. Unsurprisingly, this interpretation was not accepted by the socialist feminists who had worked so hard to adopt short hair as a symbol of resistance. One of the most pertinent avenues of critique was to label such women as dolls. Based on Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, the image of dolls in colonial Korea had come to represent women who were pampered and patronized by men at the expense of their self-determination, who had not become awakened (*chagak*), who lacked their own identity as individuals (*kaein*), and who remained content with relying on their fathers and husbands.

Alliance leader Chōng Ch'il-sōng often used the analogy, noting how “In the past, the Korean woman sat quietly in her doll's house, eating and sleeping, completely passive like the chicken painted on a folding screen. To her, there was nothing more precious than her family and her husband, so her only duty was to fulfill her domestic responsibilities.”⁴⁹ Hō went

46. Ibid, 60–62.

47. Hō, “Na ūi tanbal kwa tanbal chōnhu,” 14–16.

48. Kim Hwallan et al., “Tanbal kwa Chosōn yōsōng,” 60–62.

49. “Chōng Ch'ilsōng: Critique on *Red Love*: Kollontai's Sexual Morality,” in *New Women in Colonial Korea: A Sourcebook*, trans. Hyaeweol Choi (New York: Routledge, 2013), 106.

further in critiquing bourgeoisie femininity, describing the United States as “The country of a doll that knows how to cry” for the magazine *Pyölgöngon*. Written in an ethnographic style, Hō notes that upon initially arriving in Hawai‘i, she was struck by the United States’ incredible wealth, both natural and material—the splendid sights of the environment were accompanied by women wearing beautiful flowers in their hairpieces, a symbol of nature and urbanity in harmony. She asserts that because of the United States’ abundant natural resources, the country had been endowed with great economic prosperity, and mechanized civilization was also highly developed.⁵⁰

But Hō’s description quickly turns sour: “Americans, who have a penchant for doing things on a grand scale, build big houses. No matter what they do, they have a sense of competition to be the biggest.” Thus “the rise of capitalism has rendered a number of capitalistic states worldwide, but America is the most representative . . .” This experience drives her to lament, “Money! The Americans have done everything they have wanted to do, believing in the power of money. They think there is nothing in this world they cannot do, as long as they have money.” In a tongue-in-cheek metaphor, she suggests that the reason Americans have been blinded by money is because they cannot see through their coins which lack a hole in the middle—unlike Korean and Japanese ones.⁵¹ Because of the extent to which finance capitalism had infiltrated women’s lives in the United States, she notes:

I have heard that Japanese women are like dolls, but, when I saw American women, I felt they were real dolls. Japanese dolls do not cry even when they are shaken. American dolls can cry and move, but they exist as mere commodities for men. Sculptors make lifeless dolls, but capitalism has the power to manufacture breathing dolls. In no other country could one find what one sees throughout this capitalist bastion, America: these beautiful living dolls that seem to eat money . . . This country is like a factory that turns women into dolls that are very aware of the power of money.

Cognizant of the women’s rights movements in the United States at the time, Hō nevertheless states that the “women’s rights movement in this country are nothing more than a device to appeal to those living dolls.”⁵²

50. “Hō Chōngsuk: The Country of a Doll That Knows How to Cry: Observations of North Korea,” in *New Women in Colonial Korea: A Sourcebook*, trans. Hyaewool Choi (New York: Routledge, 2013), 177.

51. *Ibid.*, 177.

52. *Ibid.*, 178.

This sentiment was shared by others. In an anonymous article for the women's journal *Yösöng chi u*, an unnamed author describes a new profession—mannequin girls—that symbolized the “materialization” of “human dolls” (*ingan inhyöng*). A play on the Japanese term *maneki* (invitation), these mannequin girls (*manek'ing kköl*) were models, hired to sit in shop windows and invite potential consumers into the store. The author described this as one of the most tragic developments in East Asia:

Girl[s]! Days upon days ago in the primordial past there was once an age of complete women's rights known as the matriarchal system, but the world has changed and changed, changing again, thus now there are modern girls, mannequin girls, “stack girls” (*süt'aek kköl*) [prostitutes] . . . [and] dance girls.⁵³

For the author, modern girls with their emblematic short hair were paired with mannequin girls, stack girls, and dance girls, a departure from the pristine gender equality that women enjoyed under a matriarchal system in the era of primitive communism in Engels's historical narrative. The degradation of society had proceeded to the point where short-haired women were not only dolls, but actual living mannequins, and the emergence of mannequin girls epitomized how capitalist society had turned women into commodities. The author laments how “they must be simultaneously a human and a doll, both a living creature and a commercial work of art! It is a tragedy of human life. It is a sin of society.”⁵⁴ By the 1930s, then, short hair lost much of its potential for resistance, amidst its reinterpretation from gender trouble to commodified femininity.

CONCLUSION

Interest in Kang Hyang-nan's life has resurfaced. At the Jeongdong Theater in Seoul, her fictionalized story was at the center of the 2019 play *Nangrang küisaeng*, which emphasizes Kang's courtesan past and her desire to live an independent life. Unfortunately, much of Kang's later life is unclear, including details about her passing. Nevertheless, Kang's seemingly innocuous choice to shear her locks became part of a larger debate over women's

53. Ilgija [pseud.], “Manek'ing kköl üi kyönmungi” [Observations on the mannequin girls], *Yösöng chi u* 2, no. 1 (1930): 96.

54. Ibid.

hairstyle choices and helped shift the discourse on women's roles in society and the nature of femininity itself.

As a fashion statement, short hair for women in colonial Korea was a contested practice that took on a plethora of meanings, sparking debates that embroiled everyone from doctors to poets. The nebulous nature of fashion allowed women the flexibility to advocate feminist liberation. In *The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes notes that "signs are not transformed from within, as in the diachrony of language; their change is arbitrary, and yet making the signified explicit gives it the very weight of things attached to each other by what might be called a public affinity."⁵⁵ Women's short hair was a fashion statement that demanded attention, as it challenged one of the most visible markers of gender on the body. Yet even as the literate public struggled to decode what short hair signified, a small group of women seized this opportunity and the public spotlight, challenging discourses of female inferiority and arguing that gender inequality stemmed from disparities in economic relations.

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55. Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 282.