

Gender & Society in South Korea

ASIA-3030 (3 credits)

South Korea: Society & Culture

This syllabus is representative of a typical semester. Because courses develop and change over time to take advantage of unique learning opportunities, actual course content varies from semester to semester.

Course Description

This course examines how gender roles, identities, and representations shape everyday life in South Korea and how they have evolved amid rapid social, economic, and cultural change. Students trace the legacies of Confucian patriarchy and industrial modernity alongside contemporary movements for gender equality, representation, and LGBTQ+ visibility. The course explores the intersections of gender, labor, family, and media through case studies of feminist activism, changing masculinities, drag culture, and generational debates over work, marriage, and care. Special attention is given to the K-Beauty and fashion industries as sites where gender ideals are constructed, contested, and globalized. Students analyze how beauty standards, cosmetic technologies, and digital media influence self-presentation, social mobility, and resistance, revealing the tensions between conformity and self-expression in a highly visual culture. Field visits to advocacy organizations, cultural institutions, and creative industries provide firsthand perspectives on how gender is negotiated, performed, and redefined in contemporary Korea.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Explain how historical and cultural forces have established, reinforced and shifted gender roles, family structures, and labor divisions in Korea.
- Analyze the intersections of gender with other social categories (such as class, sexuality, generation and marital status) to explain the formation of social hierarchy and differential access to resources in contemporary Korean society.
- Evaluate the history and impact of contemporary movements for gender equality, feminist activism, and LGBTQ+ visibility within South Korea's political and social landscape.
- Critically examine the K-Beauty and fashion industries as powerful sites for the construction, contestation, and globalization of gender ideals, including beauty standards and self-presentation norms.

- Identify and assess the key challenges and opportunities facing different gender and sexual minority groups in South Korea, drawing on both academic literature and local contexts.
- Integrate course theories with firsthand observations from field visits to construct an evidence-based argument about how gender is negotiated, performed, and redefined in contemporary Korea.

Language of Instruction

This course is taught in English.

Instructional Methods

This course is designed around the principle that learning is an active, holistic process that extends well beyond the classroom. Seminars introduce key concepts and interpretive frameworks that are then examined, complicated, and enriched through direct engagement with people, places, and contexts — field visits, expert briefings, guided observation, and community-based learning. Field-based learning is integrated into course design rather than treated as enrichment: faculty prepare students for each engagement, guide interpretation on location, and facilitate the reflection that connects experience to course themes. Students move through cycles of experience, observation, and analysis, progressively taking greater ownership of their own inquiry. This process is not always linear, and that is by design — developing the capacity to learn from unpredictable, context-dependent situations is itself a transferable skill and a foundation for lifelong learning.

Required Texts

To be assigned by course instructor

Assignments and Evaluation

Assignment Descriptions and Grading Criteria

Participation 10%

Participation is assessed based on consistent, informed engagement in class sessions, simulation activities, and experiential learning. This includes preparation for discussions, constructive collaboration within teams, and professional conduct during site visits and guest engagements. Students are expected to contribute thoughtfully, listen actively, and engage respectfully with peers and external partners throughout the course.

Gender & Society Reflective Essays 15% (3 essays, 5% each)

Students will observe three distinct cultural moments (e.g., a community event, a performance, a shopping center, a class/school). Students will focus on one event/moment per essay. For each of the three submissions (5% each), students will write a 1-2 page reflection that first describes the event and then adds their observations in relation to the course content. Students must draw from and reference the course readings and discussions to support their analysis.

Historical Analysis Assignment (20%)

Students will select a Korean social institution (e.g., marriage, the workplace, education) and construct a visual timeline from the Confucian/Industrial era to the present, highlighting shifts and key events in relation to gender. The visual timeline must highlight at least three key historical shifts and integrate visuals (historical photos, legal milestones). Accompanying the timeline is an 4-5 page essay that analyzes the intersection of gender with the chosen institution over time, including a focus on intersectionality and drawing on course readings as a reference.

Case Study Report 25% (20% for the report, 5% for the presentation)

Students will select a local South Korean advocacy organization (e.g., a feminist collective, an LGBTQ+ rights group, or an organization focused on migrant women) to research for this assignment. The final product is a case study report that: 1) Evaluates the organization's history, goals, and primary strategies; 2) Assesses the political and social challenges they face; and 3) Proposes a strategic communication plan or project based on the student's understanding of the group's current context. The report is expected to be 5-6 pages and students are required to draw on course readings to support their analysis. The project includes a formal presentation to the class.

Final Portfolio 30%

Throughout the program, students will develop and maintain a multi-media portfolio of reflections, photographs, notes, and artifacts from field visits and course discussions and assignments. The final assessment is an Evidence-Based Argument crafted through their portfolio. Students must choose a specific aspect related to the course topic and integrate their direct observations and artifacts with at least five specific course readings to construct a novel, evidence-based argument.

Assessment

Participation 10%
Reflective Essays 15%
Historical Analysis 20%
Case Study 25%
Final Portfolio 30%

Grading Scale

94-100%	A	74-76%	C
90-93%	A-	70-73%	C-
87-89%	B+	67-69%	D+
84-86%	B	64-66%	D
80-83%	B-	Below 64	F
77-79%	C+		

Note on Attendance and Participation: Consistent participation in classes, site visits, and required program activities is essential to the academic experience. Students are expected to

participate fully and may not opt out of required components, as these activities are integral to course learning and collective discussion. If circumstances such as illness affect attendance, students must communicate promptly with the Center Director or a designated staff member. Absences may affect academic performance and course grades, and repeated or unexcused absences may result in additional academic or programmatic consequences. When absences are unavoidable, alternative academic work may be required.

Program Expectations

To support a respectful, engaging, and academically rigorous learning environment, students are expected to approach this program with professionalism, preparation, and openness. Because this is an intensive, field-based program, individual conduct directly shapes the quality of the shared academic experience.

- **Learning Community:** Students are expected to engage respectfully with differing perspectives, including those of classmates, guest speakers, and local partners. Agreement is not required, but attentive listening, intellectual openness, and respectful dialogue are essential.
- **Content Considerations:** Course materials and activities may engage sensitive or challenging topics. The classroom is a space for thoughtful, respectful engagement with complex ideas. When possible, faculty will flag particularly intense content in advance. Students who find that course content affects their ability to participate or keep up with coursework are encouraged to communicate with faculty and seek appropriate support.
- **Participation and Engagement:** Students are expected to come prepared and to engage actively in classes, discussions, and site-based learning. This includes contributing thoughtfully to discussion, asking questions, and engaging respectfully with faculty, peers, and guest speakers. Meaningful participation supports collective learning and is an essential part of the program experience.
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Because this is a multi-country, field-based program, schedules and activities may change in response to local conditions or logistical realities. Students are expected to approach such adjustments with flexibility and professionalism. Adaptability is considered part of meaningful engagement in the program.
- **Academic Integrity:** Students are expected to complete all work honestly and ethically, in accordance with academic integrity standards outlined in course and program policies.
- **Managing Academic Work:** Students are responsible for maintaining reliable access to their academic work by keeping multiple copies using secure storage methods (e.g., cloud-based platforms or the learning management system). Technical issues such as lost files or device failures do not excuse late or missing work.
- **Personal Technology Use:** Personal devices may be used for note-taking and course-related activities. Off-task use is not acceptable, particularly during discussions, site visits, or guest presentations, as it detracts from collective engagement.

- **Course Communication:** Course materials, assignments, and updates will be posted on Canvas. While the course calendar provides a general structure, adjustments may occur based on program flow or site-based learning opportunities. Students are responsible for checking the course site regularly and communicating promptly about access issues.
- **Recording Policy:** To support open discussion, recording of classes or program activities is not permitted without prior written approval from the instructor. Approved recordings are for personal academic use only. Documented academic accommodations may supersede this policy.

SIT Policies and Resources

Please refer to the [SIT Study Abroad Handbook](#) and the [Policies](#) section of the SIT website for all academic and student affairs policies. Students are accountable for complying with all published policies. Of particular relevance to this course are the policies regarding: academic integrity, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), research and ethics in field study and internships, late assignments, academic status, academic appeals, diversity and disability, sexual harassment and misconduct, and the student code of conduct.

Please refer to the SIT Study Abroad Handbook and SIT website for information on important resources and services provided through our central administration in Vermont, such as [Library resources and research support](#), [Accessibility Services](#), [Counseling Services](#), [Title IX information](#), and [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) resources.

Credit Hours: SIT adheres to the standard that 1 credit hour equals no less than 45 hours of coursework. The calculation is based on the standard 50-minute academic hour. The number of credits each course carries determines how many total hours each course involves in a semester. Of the 45-hours for 1-credit hour, one third is designated for direct faculty instruction. Direct faculty instruction includes all learning activities led by the faculty whether in the classroom or in the field — lectures, guest speakers, site visits, hands-on field activities, etc.

Note on Late Assignments: Because this program integrates classroom learning with site visits and debriefs, assignments are designed to build on one another and connect directly to learning on location. *Timely submission is therefore important for maintaining continuity and full participation in the academic experience.* Extensions may be granted *in limited circumstances and on a case-by-case basis* with approval from the Program Director or a designated staff member. Requests should be made in writing as early as possible and no later than 12 hours before the posted due date. Students are expected to communicate proactively if challenges arise. Work submitted after an approved extension period may receive a reduced or failing grade, depending on the circumstances.

Note on the Use of Generative AI Tools: In this course, students may use generative AI tools only in ways that support their own intellectual work. Acceptable uses may include

brainstorming questions, organizing notes, clarifying concepts, or supporting revision at the sentence or structure level. Students may not use AI tools to generate substantive analysis, strategic arguments, written sections, or oral responses that are presented as their own work. Because assignments emphasize applied reasoning, comparative judgment, and place-based analysis, students are expected to remain the primary source of ideas, interpretation, and decision-making.

Expectations for AI use may vary by assignment and will be discussed explicitly with faculty. In some cases, students and faculty may collaboratively establish guidelines for appropriate AI use for a particular task. Students are responsible for following the agreed-upon expectations and for seeking clarification if boundaries are unclear.

When generative AI tools are used in the preparation of an assignment, students are expected to acknowledge their use clearly and transparently, noting the tool used and the nature of its contribution (e.g., brainstorming, outlining, or language revision). This acknowledgment supports academic transparency and does not, on its own, imply inappropriate use. Policies on AI use may differ across courses and instructors within the program. Students should attend carefully to course-specific guidance and understand that responsible AI use is defined at the course level.

Sample AI Acknowledgment Statement: I used [tool name] for [purpose, e.g., brainstorming or sentence-level revision]. All analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are my own.

Course Schedule

**Please be aware that topics and excursions may vary to take advantage of any emerging events, to accommodate changes in our lecturers' availability, and to respect any changes that would affect student safety. Students will be notified if this occurs*

Module 1: Foundations: Gender, History, and Modernity in Korea

This module establishes the historical and theoretical foundations of the course. Students are introduced to the long arc of Korean modernity-from Confucian social order and colonial transformation through industrialization - and to the analytical frameworks (postcolonial feminism, intersectionality, transnational gender studies) that will guide inquiry throughout the semester. The module gives particular attention to how femininity and masculinity were constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as sites where national identity, colonial power, and gender were mutually constituted.

Session 1: Course Overview — Gender, History, and Transnational Contexts

Possible topics include:

- Korea's historical trajectory: colony, division, compressed modernity, and global presence
- Defining gender as a social construct and analytical category
- Introduction to postcolonial feminism and transnational gender studies

Required Reading:

Mackie, V. (2001). The language of globalization, transnationality and feminism. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 3(2), 180–206.

Tikhonov, V. (2007). Masculinizing the nation: Gender ideologies in traditional Korea and in the 1890s–1900s Korean Enlightenment discourse. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 66(4), 1029–1065.

Session 2: Tradition, Modernity, and the Politics of Gender — Domesticity, Marriage, and the New Man**Possible topics include:**

- Confucian ideology and the 'wise mother, good wife' ideal
- The politics of love, marriage, and divorce in colonial Korea
- Masculinizing the nation: gender ideologies and the Korean Enlightenment
- Is Confucianism incompatible with gender equality?

Required Readings:

Choi, H. (2009). 'Wise mother, good wife': A transcultural discursive construct in modern Korea. *Journal of Korean Studies*, 14(1), 1–34.

Yoo, T. J. (2005). The 'new woman' and the politics of love, marriage and divorce in colonial Korea. *Gender & History*, 17(2), 295–324.

Session 3: Colonialism and Womanhood — New Women, Empire, and National Division**Possible topics include:**

- The New Woman in relation to Japanese imperial culture
- Gender ideologies and national formation in North Korea
- Comparative colonial and postcolonial femininities across the divided peninsula

Required Readings:

Park, S. M. (2006). The making of a cultural icon for the Japanese empire: Choe Seung-hui's US dance tours and the 'New Asian Culture' in the 1930s and 1940s. *Positions*, 14(3), 597–632.

Barraclough, R. (2014). Red love and betrayal in the making of North Korea: Comrade Hŏ Jŏng-suk. *History Workshop Journal*, 77, 86–102.

Module 2

This module examines how militarization, war, and national division have structured gender relations on the Korean peninsula. From wartime sexual slavery and military prostitution to the Cold War reconfiguration of feminism and the experience of North Korean settlers in the South, students explore how violence, displacement, and geopolitics are profoundly gendered. The module asks how gender shapes who bears the costs of war—and how those costs are remembered, mourned, and contested across generations.

Session 4: Militarism, War, and the Body — Sexual Slavery, Military Prostitution, and Mourning

Possible topics include:

- Korean 'comfort women': colonial power, gender, and class
- Women, mourning, and ritual in the wake of war
- Gender, sovereignty, and the politics of testimony and memory

Required Readings:

Morris-Suzuki, T. (2015). You don't want to know about the girls? The 'comfort women', the Japanese military and allied forces in the Asia-Pacific War. *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 13(31), Article 4352.

Li, L. (2022). "Comfort women" memorials at the crossroads of ultranationalist, feminist, and decolonial critiques: Triangulating Japan, South Korea, and the United States. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 43(3), 89–116.

Session 5: Cold War, Division, and Gendered Citizenship — Diaspora, Migration, and the Divided State

Possible topics include:

- Cold War feminism and the gendered formation of national subjects
- Militarized sexuality, haunting, and diaspora
- North Korean settlers in the South: gendered modernity and ethnicized citizenship
- War migration, diaspora, and Korean American communities

Required Readings:

Kim, S. (2019). The origins of Cold War feminism during the Korean War. *Gender & History*, 31(2), 460–479.

Cho, G. (2006). Diaspora of camptown: The forgotten war's monstrous family. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 34(1–2), 309–331.

Choo, H. Y. (2006). Gendered modernity and ethnicized citizenship: North Korean settlers in contemporary South Korea. *Gender & Society*, 20(5), 576–604.

Module 3

This module turns to organized efforts to reshape gender relations through social movements, legal reform, and community advocacy. Students examine the women's movement through South Korea's democratic transition, the emergence of LGBTQ+ organizing, and the everyday negotiations of spatial autonomy and economic precarity under neoliberalism. Field visits to advocacy organizations and civil society groups provide direct engagement with the institutional and relational dimensions of feminist and queer activism in Korea today.

Session 6: Feminist Activism, Democratic Transition, and the Women's Movement

Possible topics include:

- Gender politics in Korea's transition to democracy
- Institutionalization of gender mainstreaming and the women's movement
- Feminist organizations: history, goals, and strategies
- The lesbian rights movement and its relationship to broader feminism

Required Readings:

Jung, G., & Moon, M. (2024). "I am a feminist, but . . .": Practicing quiet feminism in the era of everyday backlash in South Korea. *Gender & Society*, 38(2), 216–243.

Nam, J. (2000). Gender politics in the Korean transition to democracy. *Korean Studies*, 24, 94–112.

Kim, S., & Kim, K. (2011). Gender mainstreaming and the institutionalization of the women's movement in South Korea. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 34(5), 390–400.

Session 7: LGBTQ+ Movements, Sexuality, and Neoliberal Life

Possible topics include:

- The Korean gay and lesbian movement: history and current landscape
- LGBTQ+ identities in the contexts of family, legal identity, and the military

Required Readings:

Jones, C. (2019). Balancing safety and visibility: Lesbian community building strategies in South Korea. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2019.1678335>

Ruin. (2020). Mobile numbers and gender transitions: The resident registration system, the nation-state, and trans/gender identities. In T. A. Henry (Ed.), *Queer Korea* (pp. 323–341). Duke University Press.

Module 4

This module examines the K-Beauty and fashion industries as major sites for the production, circulation, and contestation of gender ideals in contemporary Korea. Students analyze how cosmetic surgery, beauty culture, and digital media construct norms of femininity and masculinity, and how these ideals travel globally through Hallyu. The module also considers consumer citizenship, the costs of beauty, and the strategies of those who use self-presentation as a form of social critique—or who refuse its terms entirely.

Session 8: K-Beauty, Cosmetic Technologies, and the Politics of Self-Presentation

Possible topics include:

- Beauty between empires: global feminism, plastic surgery, and self-esteem
- K-Beauty as industry, ideology, and everyday practice
- Migrant women, feminist advocacy, and the gendered costs of rights
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Required Readings:

Lee, S. H. (2016). Beauty between empires: Global feminism, plastic surgery, and the trouble with self-esteem. *Frontiers*, 37(1), 1–23.

Song, J. E. R. (2014). The soybean paste girl: The cultural and gender politics of coffee consumption in contemporary South Korea. *Journal of Korean Studies*, 19(2), 429–448.

Yun, J.-Y. (2022). Escaping the corset: Rage as a force of resistance and creation in the Korean feminist movement. *Hypatia*, 37(3), 1–19.

Module 5

This module examines how migration intersects with gender, citizenship, and belonging in contemporary South Korea. Students explore three dimensions of Korea's migration landscape: international marriage migration and the gendered terms of multicultural family policy; labor migration and the contradictions of rights-based advocacy for migrant women; and the experiences of diaspora Koreans navigating ethnic return to a homeland that renders them simultaneously family and foreign. The module culminates in a Research Teach-In and Final Portfolio presentations, inviting students to bring their field-based experience and analytical frameworks into dialogue in the spirit of collective inquiry.

Session 9: Gender, Migration, and Belonging in Contemporary Korea

Topics may include:

- International marriage migration and compensatory masculinity
- Korean adoptees and the global family of Korea
- Migrant brides, rural husbands, and the limits of multicultural citizenship

Required Readings:

Choi, S. (2025). Cultural in/corporation: Marriage migration, multiculturalism and new entrepreneurial citizens in South Korea. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 51(19), 5157–5174

Kim, M. (2014). South Korean rural husbands, compensatory masculinity, and international marriage. *Journal of Korean Studies*, 19(2), 291–325.

Kim, E. (2003). Wedding citizenship and culture: Korean adoptees and the global family of Korea. *Social Text*, 74, 57–81.

Session 10: Research Teach-In and Course Reflections

- Student teach-in presentations: advocacy organizations, movements, and policy initiatives related to gender and sexuality in South Korea
- Peer Q&A and discussion across themed panels
- Course synthesis: how is gender negotiated, performed, and redefined in contemporary Korea?