



Women in Colonial Shackles: A Comparative Study of the National Female Figures R.A. Kartini and Choi Yong-Shin

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses comparisons from a historical perspective, namely R.A. Kartini as a female character who comes from Indonesia with the female character Choi Yong-shin who comes from Korea. The research results show that the two figures have similarities and differences. Kartini was born into a Javanese aristocratic family, she studied at a European elementary school. After completing her education, Kartini wrote many of her thoughts in the form of letters containing the idea of freedom for Javanese people who had a different social status than hers. Because of her persistence in expressing freedom, Kartini's name was immortalized in Indonesia as a national figure. Choi Yong-shin also received Western education at the American Missionary School in Korea and had the status of a family member. After completing his education, Choi Yong-shin devoted his knowledge to teaching children in Saemgol Village. Choi Yong-shin also had the idea of equality, including that women and men have the same rights and responsibilities to fight for goodness, Choi Yong-shin's name was also immortalized in Korea nationally.

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INTRODUCTION

The historical role of women is often marginalized, as if their contributions have no significant impact on historical progress (Khairanis, 2024). This marginalization is evident during the colonial periods in Asian countries like Indonesia and Korea. Women were perceived as incapable of contributing to the political movements aimed at achieving independence (Saragih, 2021). Women were relegated to domestic roles, such as cooking, child-rearing, and early marriage, with their primary responsibilities confined to household management. However, this stereotype did not entirely apply to two national female heroes: Kartini from Indonesia and Choi Yong-shin from Korea (Syafputri, 2014).

In the early 20th century, Korea was under Japanese rule, while Indonesia was under Dutch control. Despite the vast geographical, cultural, and historical differences between Korea and Indonesia, both countries experienced similar colonial oppression, giving rise to comparable historical figures like Kartini and Yong-shin Choi. Despite their vastly different cultural and historical backgrounds, both figures share similarities in their upbringing, ideas, life, and influence (Kristi, 2016).

The similarities between these two figures include: Firstly, both lived under colonial rule—Indonesia under the Dutch and Korea under the Japanese. Secondly, both received higher education during their time. Kartini was educated in Dutch schools and received good education within her family. Choi Yong-shin graduated from Lucy Women's Normal School and furthered her education at university level. Despite their education, both figures did not focus solely on personal gain. They were humble, considering the future generations. Kartini had a broad perspective on women's emancipation as evident in her letters. In contrast, Choi Yong-shin dedicated her education to teaching children in Saemgol Village, persevering despite poor educational conditions. Thirdly, both died young; Kartini died at 25 after giving birth, while Choi Yong-shin died at 26 from hunger and disease while teaching in Saemgol Village. Fourthly, both left behind influential writings—Kartini's letters were published posthumously in "Out of Darkness, Comes Light," while Choi Yong-shin's life inspired the book "The Evergreen Tree," must-read for Korean youth. Finally, both are commemorated as national figures—Kartini Day is celebrated on April 21 in Indonesia, and Choi Yong-shin's name is honored in Korea with museums and subway stations named after her (H. M. Kim, 2007).

This article aims to provide a comparative historical analysis of Kartini from Indonesia and Choi Yong-shin from Korea, focusing on their backgrounds, ideas, and the similarities and differences between them. Such comparative



analysis will offer intriguing insights into the early 20th-century world history, especially considering these figures were women often overlooked in historical narratives.

METHODS

This article uses the historical method which consists of four stages, namely: heuristics (source collection) which consists of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources used contemporaneous newspaper articles, photographs, and works about the two figures. Secondary sources include books, journals, and other scholarly works relevant to the study. The sources that have been collected are then verified by studying the font, paper type, *style*, writing idea, and writing orientation of each historical source to produce the authenticity and credibility of the source so that historical sources can be used and are relevant to the study. The third stage is interpretation (interpretation) of sources that have been verified both analytically and synthetically as an effort to build a historical narrative. The fourth stage is historiography (writing history), of course the chronological and explorative aspects are key to producing comprehensive historical works (Kuntowijoyo, [2013](#)).

This article discusses the comparison between figures in a historical perspective, it naturally uses comparative historical analysis, which is a historical research method that deals with big (macrohistory) and small (microhistory) questions. In addition to the types of sources mentioned above, this article also uses the works of both figures, for example Armijn Pane published a book that shows Kartini's shift in mindset. Another work by Kartini, translated by Joost Cote, contains letters not found in Abendanon's "*Door Duisternis Tot Locht*", titled "*Surat Kartini, Feminist Indonesia 1900-1904*". It contains 108 letters from Kartini to Mrs. Rosa Manuela Abendanon-Mandri and her husband J.H. Abendanon between 1900-1904. In addition to the collection of letters, books focusing on Kartini's ideas have been published, including "*Panggil Aku Kartini Saja*" by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. While Choi Yong-shin's work, "*The Evergreen Tree*", Choi Yong-shin's biography was published by Ryu Dal-young under the title "*Choi Yong-shin Sojeon*" (*History of the character Choi Yong-shin*) and his writings in *Chosun* newspaper. The focus of this article is on comparative microhistory because only individuals are highlighted. Comparative historical analysis is concerned with explaining the construction of causal relationships that lead to the main results, emphasizing processes in the temporal dimension, and the results of comparative historical analysis compare similar or contrasting cases systematically and contextually.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Backgrounds of R.A. Kartini and Choi Yong-shin

Kartini was born in Jepara on April 21, 1879, the second daughter of eleven siblings. Kartini was born to her father's second wife named Nagasirah. Kartini's father named Raden Mas Adipati Ario Sosroningrat who was the last Regent of Jepara. He was one of the priayi who had essentially been converted into allies under Dutch colonialism. Kartini's father lived a life of limited status and power by the Dutch and Kartini lived in the shadowy environment of Dutch power. At first glance, it can be seen that Kartini's life was indeed economically fulfilling as her father was a Jepara priayi. On the other hand, due to Dutch rule and Javanese culture, freedom of expression had little place in her life journey.

Kartini's father had a progressive and cultured character in the perspective of colonialism as he was one of the Regents at that time who was fluent in Dutch. He made sure his children had to receive Western education, five of his sons did and Kartini became the only girl to receive Western education out of her father's six daughters. Thanks to this, Kartini could learn to speak, read and write in Dutch which she did at the *Europeesche Lagere School* (European Primary School). None of this would have happened if Ario Sosroningrat, Kartini's father, had not been loyal to the Dutch and Kartini would have been just an ordinary woman who would not have been famous in Indonesian history.

Furthermore, Kartini also had the opportunity to meet key figures from the Netherlands. For example, the Abendanons who were the Minister of Education in the Dutch colony, Jacques and his wife Rosa Abendanon Mandri, Marie Ovink-soer, Henri Van Ko who was also a member of parliament and leader of the social-democratic party, and his wife Nellie Van Kol. Every meeting with these figures was very important in shaping Kartini's ideas and perspective on life later on. Kartini also had pen pals named Stella Zeehandelaar, J.H. Abendanon, and Rosa Abendanon from the Netherlands. Stella Zeehandelaar and the Abendanon family were progressive feminist thinkers, Kartini often exchanged their letters. This became one of the catalysts for the formation and development of her ideas towards women's equality (the idea of emancipation).



Figure 1. Portrait of R.A. Kartini (Source: KITLV Leiden).

However, the reality of Kartini's life was far from the advanced ideas she learned. Her progressive ideas of her time did not allow her to escape the reality of her life as the daughter of a Jepara man. Kartini was unable to continue her desired further studies and ended up marrying Raden Adipati Djodiningrat, a Regent of Rembang. After Kartini married Djodiningrat they had a son named Soesalit Djodiningrat. The birth of Soesalit Djodiningrat did not necessarily make the family's journey smooth like the lives of colonial Javanese Regents, because four days after giving birth Kartini died at the age of 25 (Aniswita et al., [2021](#)).

Choi Yong-Shin was born on August 12, 1909, in Deokwon, in South Hamgyeong Province, which was the first place missionaries came to teach Christianity. At the time of his birth, Choi Yong-shin was a respected noble family in his area. The Yong-shin family was very generous, every day the family distributed food to their neighbors, local people, and the poor. The Yong-shin family's economic changes took a sharp turn for the worse when Japan began to expand almost all of Korea. It should be noted that the Japanese colonization of Korea occurred earlier than Indonesia in 1910 and its impact can be said to be crueler in Korea compared to Indonesia. Japan at that time looted the goods of aristocrats, businessmen, and rich people and the loot was used as accommodation and logistics for Japan in the colonized land (Guoqi, [2016](#)).

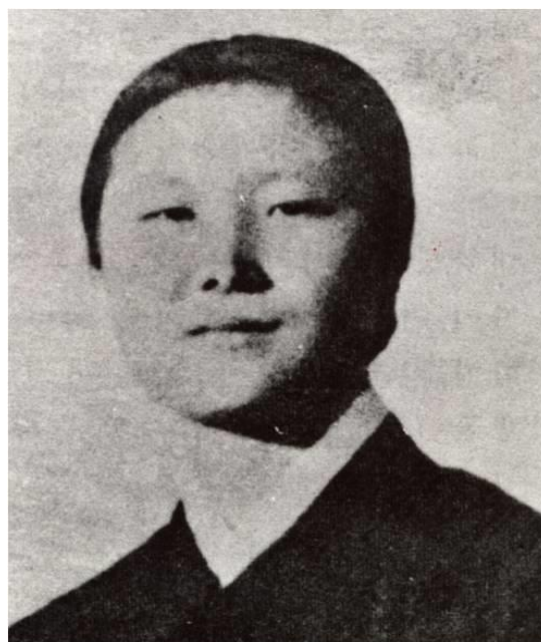


Figure 2. Portrait of Choi Yong-shin
(Source: National Activist Who Illuminated Colonial Farm Villages Through Education-Choi Yong-Shin).

Since the entry of Japan into Korea, Choi Yong-shin's family became poor because his family was one of the targets of Japanese looting at that time. Choi Yong-Shin's grandfather was an education activist who founded a school with his own money before Japan came to Korea, which means that Choi Yong-shin's blood has flowed called education, this is reinforced because Choi Yong-Shin's father was also involved in education activists. Thus Choi Yong-Shin was able to study at a school founded by American Missionaries. In the process of his education at the Western-style school, Choi Yong-Shin learned about the sense of responsibility (commitment) to help and teach people in poor educational conditions in rural areas (Y.-S. Jeong, [1974](#)).

Choi Yong-shin's ideas are formed from such a background, he understands what education all is about. For Yong-shin, education is a sense of commitment to what is obtained and then teaching it to others, especially to people who are unable to access education due to various limitations. On his journey, Yong-shin taught children in Saemgol Village, which is notorious for its slums and unfit for educational practices. Nevertheless, over the years Yong-shin continued to teach children in Saemgol Village, such as reading, arithmetic, learning history, and reflecting on Korean ancestral culture for many years Yong-shin persisted in teaching against unfavorable circumstances. At the age of 26, the defense collapsed due to disease and famine, and Yong-shin died at a very young age (J. Kim & Kim, [2023](#)).

The ideas of R.A. Kartini and Choi Yong-shin

Kartini's idea is known as "The Idea of Equality", meaning that Kartini applies and treats everyone the same regardless of social status. Kartini had the idea of equality. This is evident in her remark, "*Panggil Aku Kartini Saja*", in one of her letters. Before ending her letter in a letter she wrote to Stella Zeegandelaar on May 25, 1899, she added: "*Panggil Aku Kartini*" saja, that's my name. We Javanese don't have surnames. Kartini is both my family name and my given name." This was an unusual request in feudal Java in the late 19th century. Kartini was of noble descent and also had the cultural title of Raden Ajeng. But Kartini didn't seem to care, she tried to be called by her most informal name, trying to maintain her equality with others regardless of status and authority. Kartini wanted her idea of equality to be accepted by everyone, both those with the same status as her and the common people. The idea of equality in her letters seems to be an attempt to dismantle the culture of feudalism that has created a gap between the nobility and the commoners. According to Kartini, Western culture has indeed provided cognitive progress for those who are able to access it, including herself.

Furthermore, according to her, real progress is not only in cognitive abilities, but also in the daily practice of Javanese culture, all of which must be egalitarian (equal) (Stuers, [2013](#)). In Kartini's memorandum to the Dutch Ministry of Colonization in 1903, Kartini said that 27 million Javanese should be educated. Given Kartini's status and the good education she received, Kartini's ideas can be considered very egalitarian. She did not think that a good educational environment was like a right that high-status people were entitled to. She thought of everyone in Java, stating that everyone should be able to get an education (Lubis, [2016](#)).

Kartini was also critical of a traditional or colonial system. She criticized polygamy and the government's indifference to the people. In her correspondence with Stella, Kartini discussed various social and political topics. For example, Kartini criticized the Dutch East Indies government's policy of monopolizing the opium trade. Kartini said that the effect of the dry season had resulted in crop failure which impoverished the Javanese people and would certainly add to the suffering of the people because they were already addicted to opium. Kartini also quipped "for those who have money it doesn't matter, for those who don't they will steal, rob and kill". At such a time, Kartini had been able to make a sharp analysis of the causes of the birth of chaos and it was true that crimes occurred during the *famine* (Syafputri, [2014](#)).

Things like this are the part that shows how much Kartini thought about the lives of ordinary people. Kartini opened a girls' school in Lembang, it means that Kartini had the idea of equality for women and class. But it does not mean that Kartini rejected or hated all Javanese culture or traditions. Kartini wanted a more advanced world while still respecting Javanese culture and traditions. She only wanted a world of freedom and equality, not a system of domination and subjugation that should be the main note towards Kartini's ideas.

Kartini's idea of equality can be said to have pursued equality between men and women, equality between the ruling class and the ruled, equality between high status and low status, and equality between the rich and the poor. Therefore, Kartini's ideas are often misinterpreted, Kartini is only considered to be against polygamy which made her life stagnate. Long before Kartini opposed the practice of polygamy, she had already talked about the idea of equality (egalitarian) which in its development was widely discussed by the movement in the early 20th century.

The emergence of the idea of equality is based on the feudal culture of colonialism practices that are taking place in a region. Choi Yong-shin also had an idea of equality that emphasized equality between men and women and equality between classes (social status). It was a very progressive thought in Korean society at the time. Choi Yong-shin's idea of equality between men and women was well reflected in the article "From the School Gate to the Rural Area" that he wrote for the Chosun Newspaper when he graduated from *Lucy High School*. In the article, Choi Yong-shin said, this society is made up of both sexes, and development can be expected by helping and cooperating with each other by utilizing their individuality. To do that, he said, "Even women can be good partners. We should discard the idea of *"Namjonyebi"* meaning men are respected, women are demeaned, and Women should also learn like men (Pamungkas, [2015](#)).

What does our society need? Society demands new personnel with new education. In particular, I know that women who have received modern education are the most demanding. This is not because women are superior to men, but looking back at the past of the Joseon Dynasty, men made some efforts and activities, but these did not produce good results. It's not just because of men's lack of effort and activity. Basically, society is made up of men and women. Since ancient times, Korean women have been imprisoned in darkness for 5,000 years, forgetting even their individuality, let alone the mainstream of society. We should know that in this society, which consists of both men and women, it is impossible to expect smooth development through the activities and efforts of only men (Hartono, [2008](#)).

Next Choi Yong-shin got engaged to Kim Hak-jun but it didn't work out for various reasons. Firstly, Choi Yong-shin and Kim Hak-jun went to the same church, but at the time, men and women had to go to different churches because if you went to the same church at that time in Korea, you were considered a relative even if you were not related by blood. The fact that Choi Yong-shin and Kim Hak-jun fell in love at the same church was criticized and scolded by the people around them. However, it is known that Choi Yong-shin and Kim Hak-jun continued their romantic relationship because they considered the individual choice between men and women to be more important than such unfounded stigmas (Erni & Surya, [2018](#)).



Figure 3. Choi Yong-shin's article on equality
(Source: *Chosun Daily Newspaper*, April 1, 1928).

Secondly, Choi Yong-shin's family was against her engagement to Kim Hak-jun. Because Choi Yong-shin is the daughter of a nobleman, and Kim Hak-jun is not a nobleman. The two had different statuses that could not marry together. However, Choi Yong-shin persuaded the opposition from her family, she personally visited her clan leader, who was the oldest man in the family, and explained how she had accepted Kim Hak-jun's proposal. Firmly stating that she did not want to marry traditionally, based on social status (social class). Despite many difficulties, the family elders who were already inclined to be open to modern ideas accepted the persuasion of the then 16-year-old Choi Yong-shin (Hennida et al., [2017](#)).

In this way, Yong-shin had the idea of equality between men and women and equality between classes. The reason she was able to volunteer in poor rural areas and get involved in the Enlightenment Movement was because she shared the idea that equal educational opportunities should be given to those of low social status and could not accept an educational environment based solely on social status.

Historical Comparative Analysis of R.A. Ajeng Kartini and Choi Yong-shin

After the background of the lives and ideas of the two figures Kartini and Choi Yong-shin are described. It is time to look at the similarities and differences between the two (comparisons) based on historical context. The first thing that will be discussed is the comparison of the life backgrounds of the two figures. Kartini was born and grew up in a Javanese aristocratic environment (priyai), which means she did not experience economic difficulties during her lifetime. While Choi Yong-shin was also born in the midst of Korean aristocratic life, but in his development Choi Yong-shin did not stay in his family environment anymore because he chose to devote his knowledge to Saemgol Village which was famous for being slum and not suitable for habitation where he lived until the end of his life. Slightly different from Kartini until the end of her life she was still in the Javanese priyai environment because she was married to Adipati Djojodiningrat who was the Regent of Rembang (Rasaski & Dewi, [2023](#)).

Kartini and Choi Yong-shin both lived in the context of colonization (colonialism) Indonesia was colonized by the Dutch, and Korea was colonized by Japan. The thing that distinguishes the two is that Kartini almost three decades earlier experienced the colonization system because she was born in 1879. While Choi Yong-shin was only born in 1909, a year after Japan entered Korea to colonize.



Figure 4. Kartini Museum (Source: Author's documentation).

Both Kartini and Choi Yong-shin went through Western education, Kartini at a European elementary school and Choi Yong-shin at an American missionary school. What makes the two of them different is that Kartini's father craved Western culture and he automatically transmitted it to his son through Western-style schools. Meanwhile, Choi Yong-shin's grandfather and father were education activists, which means that Choi Yong-shin's educated blood has been flowing in him since birth because it has become the character of his grandfather and father, which is to be educated.

Kartini was married to Adipati Djojodiningrat although she eventually died after giving birth to her first child. Choi Yong-shin also had a dormitory with Kim Hak-jun although it only reached the engagement stage. Choi Yong-shin did not get married because she died due to the disease and famine that hit Saemgol Village. It is undeniable that these two great female figures both died at a young age. Kartini breathed her last at the age of 25 due to giving birth to her child. Meanwhile, Choi Yong-shin died at the age of 26 due to disease and famine that attacked Saemgol Village.



Figure 5. Choi Yong-shin Museum in Ansan City (Source: Author's documentation).

Furthermore, it is also very interesting to compare the ideas between the two figures. In realizing her ideas, Kartini did not only correspond with Stella and the Abendanon family. Kartini was also active in Lembang, opening a school for girls. However, Kartini ended her life before the activity came to fruition. Kartini's perspective that breaks through the times is narrated to us through her letters and diaries, but not everyone feels it as an actual entity. To realize this, the next generation after Kartini's death who were influenced by her began to establish schools and foundations using Kartini's name (Suriani et al., [2023](#)).

Whereas Choi Yong-shin went directly to poor rural areas and devoted his life to enlightening them through education. And in the end, he wanted to be buried there. In that regard, Choi Yong-shin was very practical. He didn't just think about entering the village, he also built a school and became a teacher. Choi Yong-shin practiced the idea of progress in the countryside directly, whereas Kartini left her ideas with letters and writings. The thing that conveys the impression to the next generation is that although both Kartini seemed theoretical and Choi Yong-shin seemed practical, it cannot be denied that both of them did extraordinary things.

The biggest difference between Choi Yong-shin's and Kartini's ideas is the idea of feminism. Kartini clearly had feminist ideas. Kartini advocated for rights as a woman and had opened a school for girls in Lembang. She spoke out about polygamy and women's right to education. Of course, Kartini did not only have feminist ideas. She also criticized the irrational system of the ruling class through letters, and she had the idea that education should be given to 27 million Javanese children. Not only was she a feminist, but she also clearly had ideas for equality and enlightenment. However, it can be said that her most important interest and focus was "women" (E. Jeong & Lee, [2018](#)).

Choi Yong-shin also argues in "From School Gates to Rural Areas" that women should not only stay at home but should participate in social activities. However, it is difficult to see Choi Yong-shin as a feminist or feminist activist. Choi Yong-shin is more like a rural community education enlightenment activist. Choi Yong-shin focused on rural areas and wanted to enlighten rural areas. When Choi Yong-shin established a school in Saemgol to teach children, it was a school for girls as well as boys. Choi Yong-shin also ran a night school in *Saemgol* for senior citizens who could not read. This clearly shows that Yongshin Choi's interest was more in the "countryside" than "women". In the article "From School Gates to Rural Areas," Yongshin Choi insisted that women should also participate in society, but she did not ask them to devote themselves to women's rights or lives. It was a request for women to participate for the sake of rural areas. Yongshin Choi's goal was to enlighten or advance the countryside (H. M. Kim, [2007](#)).

It is true that Kartini is considered a representative feminist of Indonesia, but her life and ideas were more than a feminist. Besides the idea of feminism, Kartini had progressive and good ideas. Kartini once said about education for every Javanese and also criticized the Dutch system. Things like this mean that Kartini's life and ideas were not only feminist, but more than feminist. Although Kartini was clearly a feminist, Kartini needs to be discussed from a broader perspective as a pioneering woman in the early 20th century, not just one perspective (Rasaski & Dewi, [2023](#)).



Figure 6. Sangnoksu (The Evergreen Tree) Station (Source: Gyeonggi-do).

Kartini and Choi Yong-shin both became famous through books about their lives after their deaths rather than while they were alive. However, there are differences in the types of books, authors, and writing methods. Kartini's book contents were all written by herself. Her letters were collected and published in the Netherlands by J.H. Abendanon under the title "Habishlah Gelap, Terbitlah *Terang/Door Duisternis tot Licht*" this is the best reference to reveal Kartini's ideas.

On the other hand, the book that made Choi Yong-shin famous was not written by Choi Yong-shin himself. It was reconstructed into a novel by a novelist, who was touched by watching Choi Yong-shin's life. Novelist Shim-Hoon thought strongly that Choi Yong-shin's life should be known by the Korean people. Then he wrote his story as a novel and published it under the title "*The Evergreen Tree*". The novel "*The Evergreen Tree*" was very moving and inspiring to the Korean people at the time and made Choi Yong-shin's life reviewed. Finally, these two figures were both named national female figures whose birth dates are commemorated every year, used as museum names, immortalized as street names and train station names.



Figure7. Students of the First Family Welfare School Participating in Kartini Day Commemoration Around 1970s (Source: National Archives).

CONCLUSION

The cultural practices of feudalism and colonialism between the 19th and 20th centuries have given birth to critical thinking as an anti-thesis to the old tradition. In this article, the critical thinking was born by two women, Kartini from Indonesia and Choi Yong-shin from Korea. These two great women have many similarities as well as differences. Although both of these women were born from a privileged or aristocratic background, they did not have an easy life. Their Western-style education has changed each of their worldviews. Kartini had an idea that all Javanese people should

be able to access a good education even if they did not have the same social status as her. Kartini wrote many of her thoughts in the form of letters which were later booked entitled "*Habislah Gelaplah, Terbitlah Terang*".

A high sense of optimism for equality regardless of social status, gender, and justice is at the core of his thoughts. For Choi Yong-shin, knowledge is responsibility. She bravely went directly to Saemgol Village, which is known for its slums and unfit for habitation, just to teach children who cannot afford education. During her lifetime, she never wrote as thick as Kartini, Choi Yong-shin only wrote in newspaper articles because she was too busy practicing. When juxtaposed despite the differences between the two, Kartini is the theory while Choi Yong-shin is the implementation. Both of these figures have made *legacies* in their respective homelands, and their names remain fragrant and immortalized by their countries.

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