

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: The Devotion of Japanese Wives in Korea

Knut Holdhus
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A South Korean landscape with rice fields. Illustration Grok xAI



Devotion beyond borders - The amazing story of Japanese women living a life of service to the families and neighbourhoods of their South Korean husbands

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Mending the Wounds Between Korea and Japan with Family Love for 40 Years

The Devoted Lives of Japanese Brides

by Jeong Seong-su (정성수) of [Segye Ilbo](#), translated from Korean

The lives of Japanese brides who have settled into Korean society present us today with a weighty theme. Crossing national borders and living for decades in unfamiliar lands, serving their Korean parents-in-law and raising many children, their devotion has been a hidden pillar supporting the community ethics that are gradually weakening in Korean society.

Ms. Hanae Tanaka (タナカ・ハナエ), who lives in Suwon, Gyeonggi Province, married into Korea in 1992 and for over 20 years cared for her mother-in-law, who suffered from dementia, as if she were "her sixth child". Empathizing with her husband's filial devotion, she even obtained certification as a care worker and served her mother-in-law with utmost sincerity. Until her final moments, she held and cared for her like a baby, even when her mother-in-law could no longer control her bodily functions or manage to eat on her own.

Recently, *The Fragrance of Filial Devotion* (효정의 향기), published by the International Family Council, compiled records of approximately 800 filial piety awards granted by presidents, cabinet ministers, and local government heads. Through these accounts, one catches a glimpse of the lives of Japanese brides, whose example demonstrates the value of human dignity beyond religion and nationality.



Religious affairs reporter Jeong Seong-su

After her mother-in-law's passing, what overwhelmed her was not a sense of liberation but a heart-wrenching feeling of loss. To fill the longing that welled up inside her, she began once again visiting elderly people at a senior welfare center to volunteer and serve society. Her life is like an epic that transforms painful years into the fruits of a meaningful existence.

The life of Ms. Asuka Seki (セキ・アスカ), who lives in Chuncheon, Gangwon Province, is another testament to love. In a foreign land, she supported a four-generation extended family while serving her great-grandmother-in-law and parents-in-law. For her, the most difficult challenge was her relationship with her father-in-law, as there was a high emotional barrier between them. However, holding fast to the teaching of her faith that one must "let go of all attachments and become pure in heart," she gradually narrowed the distance between them through prayer.

One day, her father-in-law suddenly collapsed from a stroke. She stayed by his side, even tending to his most intimate needs

without hesitation. Her devotion softened not only his paralyzed body but also his hardened heart, and reunited a once-divided family.



One of many couples who took part in a large international [marriage blessing](#) ceremony in Yong-in, South Korea, 30th October 1988, where 2,000 couples were Korean/Japanese



Some of the many couples who took part in a large international [marriage blessing](#) ceremony in Yong-in, South Korea, 30th October 1988, where 2,000 couples were Korean/Japanese.



Image from an album known as the *Illustrations of the Classic of Filial Piety*. Unknown artist(s) from the Song dynasty (960-1279)

These are only a few examples. Behind the devoted lives of many Japanese brides lies a distinctive religious faith. The international [mass weddings](#) proposed by Reverend [Sun Myung Moon](#) (문선명) and Dr. [Hak Ja Han](#) (한학자) were an attempt to resolve the historical resentments (역사적 원한) between Korea and Japan at the smallest social unit: the family. Historical emotions that politics could not untangle were loosened by their hands - hands that prepared breakfast each morning and changed the diapers of ailing parents. Over 40 years, they have proven the conviction that becoming a "family that cannot fully hate one another" is the shortest path to peace.

Yet reality is harsh. Recently, amid critical public opinion and strict scrutiny directed at religious organizations, insufficient light has been shed on the everyday lives and contributions of ordinary believers living within them. Approximately 8,000

Japanese brides residing in Korea have been among the most sincere practitioners of filial piety, caregiving, and community ethics - values that Korean society is gradually losing. They have served as neighborhood leaders and heads of women's associations, and as the "daughters of the village" (마을의 딸), have effectively sustained rural communities that are disappearing due to aging populations.

The stories they have shown through "caring for family" are among the most urgent assets we must recover. Drawing the teachings of The Classic of Filial Piety (효경) out from the pages of ancient books and bringing them into daily life, their recorded experiences represent a profound effort to mend the wounds between Korea and Japan through family love, and a meaningful achievement of Korea's multicultural society.

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Return To Custody As Court Rejects Health Plea

- February 21, 2026
- Knut Holdhus



Mother Han's continued custody reflects hard line by left-leaning Lee administration on religious organizations perceived to champion conservative causes

Chosun Ilbo, a large South Korean daily, carried 21st February a news item headlined "Han Hak-ja's Request to Extend Suspension of Detention Denied. Returns to Detention Center".

朝鮮日報

The logo of the Chosun Ilbo

See also [More Humanity Even in A Communist Prison?](#)

The paper reported that a South Korean court has ordered 83-year-old religious leader **Hak Ja Han** (한학자) – also called **Mother Han** – to return to detention after denying her request to extend a temporary medical release. **Mother Han**, the head of **Unificationism** – formally known as the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification** – is currently on trial over allegations that her organization illegally funneled political donations and provided high-value gifts to influential political figures.

The decision was made by the 27th Criminal Division of the Seoul Central District Court, led by Presiding Judge Woo In-seong (우인성). **Mother Han** had been temporarily released on 12th February on health grounds, after her lawyers argued that she had suffered three falls while in custody and was experiencing serious complications from high blood pressure and glaucoma. The court had allowed her release under conditions, enabling her to receive outside medical treatment. However, when her legal team sought to extend that suspension, the court rejected the request. She returned to the *Seoul Detention Center* at approximately 2 p.m. on 21st February.

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Under South Korea's *Criminal Procedure Act*, courts may suspend detention when there are compelling humanitarian reasons – such as serious illness, childbirth, or the need to attend a family funeral. In practice, such suspensions are temporary and subject to judicial discretion. **Mother Han** had previously received a **short medical suspension** in November 2025 for hospital treatment lasting three days. The court's latest decision indicates that judges concluded either that her medical needs no longer required outside release or that the legal criteria for continued suspension were not sufficiently met.

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Yoon Yeong-ho, 6th Dec. 2020. Screenshot from Peacelink TV

According to the **Chosun Ilbo** report, the charges against **Mother Han** are significant. The prosecutors appointed by the current Lee administration, seen as leftwing, allege that in January 2022 she conspired with former senior **Federation** official **Yoon Yeong-ho** (윤영호) to deliver 100 million won (approximately USD \$75,000 at the time) to **People Power Party** lawmaker Kweon Seong-dong (권성동).

The alleged purpose was to secure favorable treatment from the administration of then-President Yoon Suk-yeol (윤석열) for certain projects promoted by the **religious organization**, one of which was to obtain government backing for a potential Asian UN office located in South Korea. It is primarily a project intended to create peace on the Korean peninsula, not to strengthen the **Family Federation**.



Former President Yoon Suk-yeol of the Republic of Korea April 25, 2023, in Maryland, USA. Photo: NASA/Aubrey Gemignani. Public domain image. Cropped

Additional accusations claim that between April and July 2022, 144 million won in funds from the **religious organization** while **Yoon Yeong-ho** served as its secretary-general, were divided into smaller donations and distributed to multiple ruling party lawmakers – a practice known in Korea as “split donations”, which can violate campaign finance laws.



Former First Lady of the Republic of Korea **Kim Keon-hee** posing for a photo, April 2023, in the White House. Official White House Photo by Erin Scott. Public domain image

Further allegations involve luxury gifts. Prosecutors claim that through an intermediary religious figure known as “Geonjin Beopsa” (건진 법사), expensive items – including a Chanel handbag and a high-value Graff necklace – were delivered to First Lady Kim Keon-hee (김건희) in July 2022 in connection with pending matters promoted by **Yoon Yeong-ho**.

Mother Han also faces charges under the *Political Parties Act* for allegedly directing **Federation** members to collectively join the ruling **People Power Party** in order to influence its March 2023 leadership primary.

For international observers, the image of an octogenarian religious leader with **serious health concerns** being held in detention may simply appear outrageous. However, several political and legal factors help explain the situation.

First, South Korea has in recent decades developed a strong prosecutorial culture centered on political accountability. Former presidents, cabinet ministers, corporate conglomerate heads, and party leaders have all faced investigation, imprisonment, or both. Pretrial detention is more commonly used in high-profile corruption cases than in many Western democracies, particularly where prosecutors argue there is risk of evidence tampering or coordination among co-defendants.

FATES OF SOUTH KOREAN PRESIDENTS

- Syngman Rhee** (in office 1948-1960) – **Exile in Hawaii until death**
- Yun Bo-seon** (1960-1962) – **Convicted of treason**
- Park Chung-hee** (1963-1979) – **Assassinated**
- Choi Kyu-hah** (1979-1980) – **Forced out by coup**
- Chun Doo-hwan** (1980-1988) – **Death sentence, pardoned**
- Roh Tae-woo** (1988-1993) – **Jailed, pardoned**
- Kim Young-sam** (1993-1998) – **Son jailed**
- Kim Dae-jung** (1998-2003) – **Aides investigated**
- Roh Moo-hyun** (2003-2008) – **Suicide during probe**
- Lee Myung-bak** (2008-2013) – **Jailed, pardoned**
- Park Geun-hye** (2013-2017) – **Impeached, jailed, pardoned**
- Moon Jae-in** (2017-2022) – **Aides probed**
- Yoon Suk-yeol** (2022-2025) – **Impeached, removed from office**

Now, also religious organizations having supported former presidents are in danger: South Korea has a long, almost uncanny pattern of post-presidency trouble – enough that some Koreans joke there's a “curse” on the Blue House. Each new administration often tries to “clean house” by prosecuting the previous one. The presidency in South Korea has immense influence, making both abuse and backlash more likely. This has created a cycle: leaders push legal or moral boundaries while in office, then political opponents pursue them once they step down. Illustration: Knut Holdhus



Declared the ‘final war’ against the **Unification Church**:

Second, there are powerful political forces actively campaigning against the **religious organization** currently led by **Mother Han**. In Japan, the communist party leadership has publicly stated that they are actively waging the “**final war**” against the **Family Federation**. Lawyers from the far left of the political spectrum founded a network of activist lawyers that for decades has been demanding the dissolution of the **Federation**.

Recently, Lee Jae-myung (이재명), the left-leaning President of South Korea stated publicly that he wants to initiate a similar process, not just against **Mother Han's organization**, but also Shincheonji [See editor's note below], another fairly large new religious movement regarded as conservative. In addition, even

Kazuo Shii,
chairman of the
Japanese
Communist Party
(JCP) 2000-2024,
here 30th March
2023. Photo:

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religious movements regarded as conservative, in addition, even large Christian churches perceived to support conservative political causes have come under intense scrutiny from the Lee administration. Against this backdrop, courts may feel pressure to demonstrate that they are not taking lightly on the allegations – in **Mother Han's** case, in spite of her frailty, **poor health**, old age, and absence of any previous criminal record.

Third, the case is unfolding in a polarized political climate. Allegations involve senior figures associated with the current or former ruling camp, making the matter politically charged. In such circumstances, judicial authorities may be especially cautious about appearing lenient.

At the same time, critics argue that humanitarian considerations should weigh more heavily when a defendant is elderly and **medically fragile**. Korean law does allow for suspension in cases of serious illness, but the standard is not automatic; courts balance medical evidence against legal risks.

Ultimately, **Mother Han's** continued detention reflects the current administration's increasingly aggressive approach to cases involving religious bodies – one that is ready to punish and even dissolve large religious organizations, even when it is only a handful of individuals that may have broken laws, some of which apply to grey-zone areas in the relationship between religion and politics.

See also [More Humanity Even in A Communist Prison?](#)

Text: *Knut Holdhus, editor*

Featured image above: *Image showing how **Mother Han** may well appear now.*
Illustration: Grok xAI, 21st February 2026.

[**Editor's note:** **Shincheonji**, officially known as *Shincheonji Church of Jesus, the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony*, is a new religious movement founded in South Korea in 1984 by Lee Man-hee, who claims to be the promised pastor mentioned in the Bible's Book of Revelation. Shincheonji teaches that the Book of Revelation is being fulfilled through its church and that Lee Man-hee has received divine revelation to interpret it.]

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